



# *Spirit Above Wars*

A Study of the English Poetry of the  
Two World Wars

‘For God’s sake cheer up and write more optimistically—The war’s not ended yet but a poet should have a spirit above wars.’

Robert Graves  
in a letter to Wilfred Owen, 1917.

**A. BANERJEE**

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## *Preface*

In this book, which discusses the poetry of both the World Wars, I have examined the conventional attitudes to the subject and tried to demonstrate their inadequacy. This has involved a radical revaluation of the war poems of such known poets as Sassoon and Owen as well as a new recognition of the merits of comparatively neglected poets like Douglas, Lewis and Keyes of the Second World War. By putting this poetry in its literary context I have tried to show that through their war experiences these poets have enlarged the modern poetic consciousness.

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A. BANERJEE



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## ONE

### *The Pre-war Poetic Scene*

THE ENGLISH poets of the First World War were confronted by a new phenomenon of mechanical warfare on a gigantic scale, and created a new kind of 'war-poetry' which has no close previous parallel in English literary history. Both the nature of this war, and the circumstances under which the poets came to write about it, were unique. It is well-known that it was the first war in which man's increased skill in the fields of science and technology was harnessed for causing destruction on almost an unlimited scale. It was also the first war in which the whole nation was involved. The civilians went to war along with the professional soldiers, and since, unlike the professional soldiers, the civilians were not steeled by an unquestioning spirit of 'discipline and obedience', they became more acutely sensitive to the brutality and futility of war. What is more, they were moved to express their own feelings in verse and prose. This fact can go to explain the enormous amount of literature that was produced during the war years. Speaking of this war, Edmund Blunden pointed out: 'The greatest war, breaking all records, produced the greatest number of poets (at least in the English language) that any war has done<sup>1</sup>.' It is true that a lot of this writing was trivial and ephemeral in interest but the significant point is that there *were* some poets who, not content to treat the war theme in conventional terms of justification and glorification, helped in establishing a new relationship between the Muse and Mars. Here we are concerned with their poetry. In order to limit this study to manageable proportions, and also to investigate this new kind of 'war poetry' that was born out of the poets' immediate and personal experiences, we shall confine ourselves to a discussion only of the soldier-poets who wrote about, and during, the war. This would exclude the more established poets of the time like Hardy, Pound and Yeats on the one hand, and poets like Herbert Read and David Jones on the other, each of whom wrote their best poems about the war from a certain distance.

One of the most difficult problems which arise in a study of the poetry of the First World War is connected with its literary lineage.

For a proper evaluation of this poetry, it is necessary to find out the various cross-currents of English poetic trends, out of which, or against which, modern war poetry came into being. The poetic scene during the Edwardian era was pretty chaotic. Several movements arose in the field of English poetry at the turn of the century, but it is safe to suggest that almost all of them reacted against the poetry of the *fin-de-siècle* years. Beardsley had died in 1898, and both Wilde and Dowson in 1900. Lionel Johnson followed them in 1902, when Yeats started a new phase in his poetic career at the Abbey Theatre. Arthur Symonds published his *Poems* in 1901, but turned to literary history and criticism. Only John Davidson of this group, kept on writing well into the new Edwardian decade. His five *Testaments* appeared from 1901 to 1908. He was always an isolated figure and, in any case, he drowned himself in 1909. Thus, Decadence passed into history at the close of the nineteenth century, and a different kind of poetry marked the new age.

The distinguishing trait of the poets of the nineties was that they cut themselves off from the life of the common man in order to devote their lives and writings to different ideals. Many artists of late Victorian England found that the materialistic life around them was inimical and hostile to all artistic activities. Poets like Coventry Patmore, Francis Thompson and Alice Meynell rejected the world around them and went to Roman Catholicism because it was still vital and significant for them. The Pre-Raphaelites, on the other hand, having abandoned contemporary values, went to Greek and Medieval times for sustenance and comfort. The Decadents, though they were one with the poets of these two groups in their rejection of the contemporary world, were different from either group in that they did not seek, nor did they find, countervalues in any of the older traditions, religious or secular. What they sought was a freedom of their personal emotions and sensations. Their disgust with the world, and their alienation from it, induced in them a feeling of melancholy. But because they refused to take into account, in their poetry as well as in their lives, the objective facts of life, their feelings of sadness lacked strength and vitality, leaving a sense of weariness and boredom, a pallid indifference. No doubt, in occasional poems like Wilde's 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' or Dowson's 'To One in Bedlam', they could create poignant poetry out of the sordidness and misery of Victorian life, but in the majority of their poems they appear as self-conscious bohemians who revelled in sadness and melancholy, and

expressed their feelings in dolorous cadences. Yeats pointed out that these poets, whom he described as 'The Tragic Generation', were in their 'insistence upon emotion which has no relation to any public interest, gathered together, overwrought, unstable men'.<sup>2</sup> In matters of technique, though Decadents like Dowson made interesting experiments, and Lionel Johnson wrote verses of classical simplicity and dignity, they were, in general, rather conventional in the manner of the Pre-Raphaelites. Their bookish and hackneyed images and romantic and languorous expressions looked backwards and not forwards.

It was mainly against this kind of poetry that most poets of pre-war England reacted. In the preface to his *Collected Poems* (1908), Synge lamented the current state of English poetry, and remarked: 'It may be said that before verse can be human again it must learn to be brutal.' Ezra Pound predicted that modern poetry 'will move against poppycock, it will be harder and saner, it will be . . . "nearer the bone"'. It will be as much nearer the granite as it can be, its force will lie in its truth, its interpretative power . . .<sup>3</sup> Indeed, there was a general demand for a return to 'realism' in poetry. But 'realism' was interpreted differently by different poets, so that in many cases we find that though the pre-war poet was dealing with a more common theme, he was, in some essential respects, almost as unreal as were the poets of the nineties.

The blustering Imperialists like Kipling, Newbolt, Austin and Noyes avoided the morbid self-entanglements of their immediate predecessors, and wrote verses of noisy, and often vulgar, broad, popular appeal. They were unashamedly patriotic, and they advocated the values of loyalty and obedience in order to carry out 'the white man's burden'. In doing so, they pandered to a vein of unself-critical popular sentiment and seldom succeeded in creating significant poetry. They never delved beneath the surface facts, and tended to evade the perplexities and mysteries of human existence as such. Kipling was a considerable poet, as Eliot was one of the first critics to acknowledge. His best poems deal with the elemental themes of fear, courage and endurance: he revived the supple, colloquial verse of the English light verse and ballad tradition. But most of his pre-war poems are jingling and jingoistic: 'The Galley Slaves' and 'Loot' are marked by a morbid enthusiasm for violence. In reading such poems, one gets the impression that 'for Kipling, England and the Empire were the symbols which enjoyed complete poetic validity unqualified by pious self-questioning and doubts about the social justice of our

legislation in various parts of it'.<sup>4</sup>

Abstract concepts of duty and patriotism were further exemplified in the works of Henry Newbolt. For him soldiering was a game like football or cricket, and he advised that it should be treated in the like spirit. The following lines from his once popular 'Vitai-Lampada' show how far removed he was from the terrible realities of warfare:

The sand of the desert is sodden red,  
 Red with the wreck of a square that broke;  
 The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel's dead,  
 And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.  
 The river of death has brimmed its banks,  
 And England's far and Honour a name,  
 But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:  
 'Play up! play up! and play the game!'

The incredible superficiality of such an attitude, and the grim irony of it when contrasted with later war poetry, are self-evident. Similarly, Alfred Austin, though not as much respected among fellow Conservatives as Kipling and Newbolt were, was extolled in his day for being 'before all things a normal and healthy man, in close contact with realities'.<sup>5</sup> In a poem like 'Why England is Conservative', Austin glorified the picture of a conservative England, and lashed out at all those tendencies which threatened it. The poet distorted the new progressive trends into images of chaos and disorder, and returned to an idealized and sentimentalized picture of a 'proud' England:

And though the throats of envy rage and rail  
 Be fair proud England, proud fair England still!

These poets found an immediate, and enthusiastic, audience. C. K. Stead's<sup>6</sup> researches show not only how the literary tastes of the reading public had deteriorated in the first decade of this century, but also how powerful they were in dictating to the writers the kind of works that they should write. Thus, in 1913, Arnold Bennett warned about 'the futility of writing what will not be immediately read... the sagacious artist will respect basic national prejudices'. Pinto divided the society of this time into various categories. There were the rich people, who 'seemed to live in a hollow empty world'. On the other extreme were the poor slum-dwellers, and the class of manual

labourers whose literary tastes were confined to traditional ballads. Between these two categories lay the vast middle-class population. Among these middle-class people, there were, of course, some intelligent, liberal men who realized that many Victorian ideals were becoming irrelevant in the present context, and were aware of the immediate problems of poverty and unemployment. The consciousness—indeed, the conscientiousness—of such people was mainly reflected in the fields of novel and drama, but was also found in the works of a few poets. We shall discuss those poets later on, but right now let us examine the literary tastes of the other major portion of the middle-class who lived in the growing suburbs of big English towns, earning a good living, sending their children to Oxbridge, and taking their holidays on the Continent:

They had literary traditions, but especially in the field of poetry, these were overlaid with a thick veneer of conservatism that was at once academic and puritanical. Poetry was regarded as something inseparable from the worship of the classics, Tennyson, Browning, Arnold. . . . Poetry had to be pleasant, dignified, moral, not difficult or introspective, and based on the pretence that the rhythms of suburban life were still those of the old England of the feudal countryside.<sup>7</sup>

This was the class to which the Imperialists, whom we have mentioned above, appealed, because these poets were committed to political and social ideals which had begun to crumble—a fact which neither these poets nor their readers wished to acknowledge. The other type of poets who found favour with this audience could be represented by Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, William Watson, Stephen Philips, Lawrence Binyon and Robert Bridges. One pervading trait of these poets (even though they were not a conscious literary group) was their worship of the classics and a lack of revolutionary spirit. Poets like Watson and Philips did not think ‘that there (was) anything seriously wrong with the tradition of the English verse that (had) its roots in Ovid, Virgil, Sophocles, and Homer, and whose poetic charter was drawn by Aristotle’.<sup>8</sup> The worst traits of the Romantics haunted their muse, and they wrote imitative poetry in the manner of Wordsworth and Keats, Tennyson and Arnold, marked by ornateness and sentimentality. Poets like Bridges and Binyon, on the other hand, were the cultured and cultivated gentlemen who



wrote quasi-philosophical poems, and translations, in skilful, prosodic lines.

Thus these poets, whether they wrote Imperialist verses or graceful 'philosophical' poems, were out of tune with their age. Their poetry gave little evidence of their awareness that they lived in 'a period in which, as a result of developments in the religious, political, economic, military and other fields, men had lost faith in certain traditional ways of seeing the world'.<sup>9</sup> They were under the illusion that they were writing about life though their poems had as little relevance to the deeper problems of contemporary living as the poetry of the *fin-de-siècle* era. Unfortunately, they had the support not only of the public but also of the critics. This was how the new books of Watson, Noyes, and Newbolt were reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement* (18 November 1909):

The three poets whose names are here joined, different as they are from each other, are alike in this, that they all belong to the centre of poetic tradition. Neither (*sic*) of them insists on a new formula for the definition of poetry. The compass of the old instrument is, in their view, still wide enough to contain modern music. They aim at a quality of beauty in expression which demands no violent adjustment of sympathy or taste on the part of the reader.

More original and daring poets like Pound and Eliot had started to think on different lines because they felt that the 'old instrument' was *not* 'wide enough to contain modern music'. Artists like Ezra Pound remarked that the popular poet had indulged in a 'debasement of the literary coin'<sup>10</sup> and that 'the general tendency of British criticism at the time was towards utter petrification or vitrefaction'.<sup>11</sup> But though rebels had begun writing from about this time (1909)—Yeats had changed his style, Eliot, presumably, was contemplating his 'Prufrock', and the Imagist movement was well on its way—it was only in the nineteen-twenties that the new kinds of poetry made their impact widely felt. For the time being, the 'non-revolutionaries' reigned supreme in the popular imagination:

Until the War the new movements did not succeed in catching the attention of the public. The old favourites remained. In 1913 the *Journal of Education* held a plebiscite to discover the most popular poets in England, still living. Kipling received twice as many votes

as his nearest rival William Watson. Robert Bridges (not the same kind of poet, but whose diction was recognizably 'beautiful') was third. Alfred Noyes was fourth.<sup>12</sup>

The only serious challenge to the popular pre-war poetry came from the Georgian Anthologies, edited by Edward Marsh. Georgian poetry has been under critical fire for a long time, until quite recently when some critics, notably C.K. Stead and Robert Ross,<sup>13</sup> have sought to rehabilitate it. In more recent books, John Press and John Wain<sup>14</sup> seem to sum up the 'new attitude' towards the Georgians. What such critics are saying in effect is that, instead of regarding the Georgians as late Victorians, they must be seen as rebels against the poetry of the nineties and the Imperialists. The view in itself is neither new nor original, for Robert Graves spoke of the Georgian's 'reaction to Victorianism'<sup>15</sup> as early as 1927, and Bullough had recognised the fact (in 1934) that the Georgians had rebelled 'against the exquisite poses of Wilde and his fellows'.<sup>16</sup> But the charge against the Georgians has always been (and remains valid even now) that in their reaction against the preceding poetry, they did not break new grounds as for instance the Imagists were trying to do. Instead of going forward, the Georgians went backwards to the long English poetic tradition, starting from 'Piers Plowman', the tradition which partly consists of noting down the actual sights and sounds of nature, or the actual condition of the poor, and conveying them in clear, homely words.

The so-called 'shocking realism' of the Georgians which made some of their readers recoil was more sensational than of any literary significance. Abercrombie and Bottomley introduced in their plays descriptions of human beings subjected to revolting tortures ('Tale of St. Thomas') and frogs being wrapped in paper and squashed by carts ('The End of the World'). Ralph Hodgson described how the 'loathly birds' awaited the death of a dying bull in 'The Bull' and Wilfrid Gibson came out with some revolting descriptions of camels in 'Hoops'. D. H. Lawrence rightly criticised 'such nasty efforts at cruelty'.<sup>17</sup> It was, however, an anonymous reviewer of Bottomley's 'King Lear's Wife' who put the case against this mistaken conception of artistic realism most forcefully:

Now, undoubtedly, there are unpleasant people and horrible things in the real world, but there is too much method in Mr. Bottomley's madness. He is out to write a new kind of poetry, a poetry which

is not romantic. He is not going to get a cheap effect like Tennyson in 'The Idylls of the King', by drawing blameless prigs. But he gets a cheap effect by the opposite method....He drew ugliness as the Victorians drew beauty, for the sake of ugliness, as if it were interesting in itself quite apart from what it is made of. This is mere reaction from the notion that beauty is interesting in itself: and his *King Lear* is no more interesting, no more alive and growing, than Tennyson's *King Arthur*. He is as rigid and unreal in his own conventional baseness as *King Arthur* in his conventional loftiness.<sup>18</sup>

A similar charge of a lack of serious concern with reality can legitimately be brought against Georgian nature poetry—and nature was by far the most favourite subject of the Georgians. They wrote about English farms and fields, birds and beasts, with a caressing delight. Their poems were generally concerned with descriptions of natural objects and scenes, and their gentle pleasure in them. It is not at all surprising that poets like Eliot and Pound felt that the Georgians had nothing to contribute to the development of modern English poetry, as they saw it. And when in 1934 C. Day Lewis tried to trace the development of English poetry in the post-war decades, he dismissed the Georgians as 'a sadly pedestrian rabble'.<sup>19</sup> Stephen Spender recalled that his generation of sensitive young men were attracted by the writings of Eliot and Lawrence rather than the Georgians because the latter 'did not seem to touch our lives at any point'.<sup>20</sup> In the light of such opinions of the Georgians by the important figures of the post-war poetic scene in England, and also in view of the traditional nature of Georgian poetry, the Georgians can hardly claim any place in the modern poetic revolt. John Wain has speculated that 'if England could have been left in peace, the work of the Georgians would have revealed itself as adequate to the needs of a new genius'.<sup>21</sup> But the sad fact was that England, indeed the world, was not left in peace, so that a new kind of poetry, that was adequate to its needs, came into being. The real forerunners of modern English poetry were the Imagists, who not only felt the need (earlier than the Georgians did) to rebel against the poetry of the nineties, but also anticipated, in matters of technique at least, the kind of poetry that was to finally dominate the English poetic scene after the war years.

Moreover, it is wrong to assume, as critics like C. K. Stead have done, that modern war poetry grew out of Georgianism. When, in the

third volume of the Georgian anthology (1916-1917), war poets like Robert Nichols, Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon and Isaac Rosenberg did appear—though it must be remembered that their non-war poems far outnumbered their war poems—the older Georgians expressed their protest, and Bottomley suggested to Gibson that the older compatriots might find it necessary to form ‘a new society of George the Firsts’.<sup>22</sup> But evidently, this new kind of poetry failed to make a permanent impact on the Georgian movement, so that the last two volumes of *Georgian Poetry* (1918-19 and 1920-21) followed the essentially quiet, pietist, pastoral trends of the earlier volumes. In fact, Ross admits that the decline of the Georgians can be directly attributed to the war. The movement began to founder, he remarked, when, during the war years, it began to substitute ‘agreeableness’ for ‘truth’.<sup>23</sup> He does not go on to investigate the real causes of this tendency beyond implying a general ‘failure of the imagination’. David Daiches explains the phenomenon by pointing out that the Georgians could be ‘realistic’ only so long as the reality was agreeable and superficial, but that when the war presented them with terrible realities, the Georgians failed to bring them within their poetry, and, therefore, in their basic desire for ‘agreeableness’, they sacrificed ‘truth’.<sup>24</sup>

As we shall see, Sassoon’s example clearly demonstrated how difficult it had become for the English poets to deal with the fierce subject of war’s brutalities within the fragile Georgian mould. It is undeniable that the poets of the First War had adopted the simple diction and the conventional metres and forms of the Georgians, but these techniques were not strictly a Georgian ‘innovation’. And, in any case, one of the understandable weaknesses of the poetry of the First World War was the use of worn-out diction and outmoded (in the context of their new subject-matter) forms of versification. Better poets like Sorley, Owen and Rosenberg tried, within the severe limitations under which they wrote their poems, to modify the Georgian techniques that were readily available to them. Thus, Sorley and Rosenberg clearly experimented with some of the methods of the Imagists, and Owen, as Rosemary Freeman has brilliantly demonstrated, ‘used the vocabulary and the rhythm accepted in the poetry of the time’<sup>25</sup> for parodic purposes.

Much confusion about the place of the Georgian anthologies in the history of modern English poetry arises from the failure of critics to recognise (a) that Edward Marsh was wholly responsible for the poems

selected for the anthologies, and (b) that though Marsh was extremely catholic in the choice of *poets*, he was rather strict in selecting only those poems which measured up to his limited literary tastes and preferences. 'Intelligible, musical and racy'<sup>26</sup> were the qualities that he looked for in poetry, and the poems of his anthologies, in general, can be best described in those terms. It is not accidental that these were precisely the qualities of contemporary poetry which came under attack, directly or indirectly, from the war poets. In a paper on Maschfield, read out to his school's Literary Society on 3 November, 1912, Sorley commented on the thinness and sentimentality of much contemporary verse:

The voice of our poets and men of letters is finely trained and sweet to hear; it teems with sharp saws and rich sentiment; it is a marvel of delicate technique, it pleases, it flatters, it charms, it soothes; it is a living lie.<sup>27</sup>

And it is reasonable to suppose that when in his famous preface Owen declared, 'Above all I am not concerned with Poetry', he was referring to the limitations of the Imperialist and Georgian verse.

When we look back at Georgian poetry, it seems rather anachronistic, with little evidence of the fact that these poems were written only a couple of years before the First World War started, and indeed during the war years. The Georgians deliberately averted their eyes from the complex realities of contemporary life. There is no need for an artist to deal directly with the world around him, but, as Pinto has remarked, 'poetry which directly grows out of a fully developed sensibility reflects in its imagery and rhythms the quality of contemporary life, as those of Marlowe's plays reflect the violence and splendour of the age of Elizabeth and Drake and those of Pope's satires the irony and sceptical grace of the age of Bolingbroke and Voltaire'.<sup>28</sup> And in the failure of the Georgians to respond to the ethos of their times, one can get clues to their characteristic weaknesses and limitations. The Georgians, therefore, despite their claim that they were bringing about a poetic renaissance, were not to give lead to the poetry of the 'Age of Anxiety', which was to dominate the English poetic scene during the next few decades. However, they deserve to be credited for not only attracting a larger reading public to poetry, but also trying to 'educate' that public's poetic tastes, without disturbing them violently. This meant that the public should reject the anaemic

reveries of the Decadents, and the rhetorical outbursts of the Conservative Imperialists, and enjoy poetry that dealt with more everyday and less controversial themes, in homely diction and familiar metres.

It is seldom recognised that there were a few English writers who were writing steadily throughout the pre-war decades when so many poetic movements had come and gone: poets like Henley, Housman and Hardy had nothing to do with these movements. If anything, they can be seen in line with the contemporary practitioners of other literary forms, dramatists and novelists like Shaw and Galsworthy, Conrad and Forster, who were wrestling with the new problems and complexities of modern life. These poets seem to have taken seriously Synge's advice that 'if verse can be human again, it must learn to be brutal'. They were not so much 'brutal' as sensitive to a general loss of faith that had sustained their predecessors in moments of crisis. They became aware of the cracks that had appeared in the walls of Victorian self-confidence, and the slums and miseries which had come to afflict the urban population of industrialised England. In this category fall, in addition to the poets mentioned above, poets like Davies, Masfield and Gibson, who had already appeared in the Georgian anthologies. But Marsh had included only those poems of these poets that did not violate his prim tastes and principles. So, these are those poets 'whose contributions (to the Georgian anthologies) do not at all represent the scope of their work as a whole'.<sup>29</sup> For example, W. H. Davies has always been regarded as a singer of innocent love and untrammelled beauties of nature, but he had suffered too much in his own life, and wanted to write about his tragic experiences. In 1917, he published in a small magazine called *Form* (No. 2, April 1917, p. 18) a poem 'Confession', which shows how his earlier poems did not reflect his deepest thoughts:

One hour in every hundred hours,  
I sing of childhood, birds and flowers.  
Who reads my character in a song,  
Will not see much in me that's wrong.  
But in my ninety hours and nine  
I'd not tell what thoughts are mine:  
They are not so pure as find words  
In songs of childhood, flowers and birds.

Thus, in poems like 'Saturday Night in Slums' and 'The Sleepers',

Davies wrote about the seamy aspects of life. The same can be said of Gibson ('Fires', 'Thoroughfares', 'The Shaft'), and Masfield ('The Everlasting Mercy', 'The Widow of Bye Street'). Such poems of these poets are born out of the harsh realities of modern life. They avoid the euphorism and the irrelevance of much contemporary verse, and though they hardly make any metrical innovation, they use simple, actual speech for presenting authentic sketches of contemporary living.

W. H. Henley went a step further in the exploration of the reality around him, and in experimenting with new techniques of versification. Unfortunately, he is known more for the triviality of his ballads and the hollowness of his much anthologised Imperialist poem 'Invictus' than his more serious poems. It is significant that already in the last decades of the nineteenth century when he wrote his poems, the world of his poetry had been shaken by loss of faith and the discoveries of science:

It must be true. The world, a world of prose  
Full crammed with facts, in science swathed and sheeted,  
Nods in a stertorous after dinner doze!  
Plangent and sad, in every wind that blows  
Who will hear the sorry words repeated:  
    'The Gods are Dead!'

('Bric-a-Brac')

Henley's first poems appeared, under the title 'Hospital Outlines', in *Cornhill Magazine* (1875), and they were based on his personal experiences while he was a patient of Lister at the Edinburgh Infirmary. They deal with sickness and hospital, which can be taken as symbols of the modern preoccupation with morbidity and science. Moreover, these experiences are conveyed through images and techniques which clearly anticipate the trends of post-war English poetry. Henley's images are anti-romantic, and they are taken straight from the world around him. For example, in 'Vigil' the traditionally romantic image of the moon is transformed, and she is seen as a dirty prostitute. The poem abounds in impressionistic touches ('Far in the stillness a cat/Languishes loudly. A cinder/Falls'), and even though the poet has not been able to subordinate the impressions under a central emotion, the poem is obviously a forerunner of Eliot's 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night'. Henley's other volume, *London Voluntaries*, is also

essentially impressionistic, but the poems are about city life, and a new stock of images are introduced into English poetry. His disjointed and irregular lines with their jolting rhythms are also expressive, in a novel manner, of the fragmentation and divided consciousness of modern life.

It may be argued that to link the 'pessimism' of Housman and Hardy with the crumbling of the Victorian world may be a little far-fetched, because 'pessimism' can arise out of very subjective reasons. This would seem to be particularly true of Housman, whose elegiac verses appear to lack an 'objective-correlative'. Because of his classical bent of mind, Housman is too prim and fastidious to embody his vision in a powerful poetic symbol so that a body of poems like *A Shropshire Lad* does not quite succeed in carrying the weight of the poet's sense of fearful mysteries. But somehow the suspicion remains that his hostile world, 'Whatever brute and blackguard made this world' (*Last Poems* IX), was the world of Henley, where the 'Gods are Dead!', and of Hardy where the traditional view of God and the universe could no longer be maintained.

Though, under the influence of nineteenth century thinkers like Darwin, Huxley and Schopenhauer, Hardy came to reject God's role in the creation of this world, and believed that the universe was motivated by an Unconscious Will, he could not entirely discard the world-view that he had inherited from his forefathers. Much of the tension in his poetry arises out of this conflict. In many of his poems he takes up the traditional idea of a Christian universe, motivated and ruled by a benevolent God, and sets it beside the universe of the modern scientists. In the well-known poem 'The Oxen' he speaks of the traditional belief that on Christmas Eve, the Oxen kneel at prayer, but as the poem develops the falsity of this view is made apparent:

So fair a fancy would weave  
 In these years! Yet I feel,  
 If someone said on Christmas Eve  
 'Come: see the oxen kneel,  
 In the lonely barton by yonder comb  
 Our childhood used to know.'  
 I should go with him in the gloom  
 Hoping it might be so.

It is poem of complex attitudes. On the one hand, there is the •



recognition that 'In these years' it is impossible to maintain such a simple faith, but then there is also the poignant wish that 'it might be so'. The childhood of the poem can be taken to mean the childhood of the entire human race to which experience has brought bitter truths. The conflict between what life actually is and what human desires want it to be, has been expressed in moving terms. And it is the triumph of poetry that in this simple little poem life is seen from inside the human psyche rather than only in terms of the intellectual perspective of nineteenth century science and philosophy.

Major poet that he was, Hardy was able to lift a particular experience and invest it with universal significance. Middleton Murry was one of the first critics to note this quality in Hardy's poetry when he said that 'the poet's reaction has behind it and within it a reaction to the universe'.<sup>30</sup> This is not the place to enter into a detailed examination of Hardy's poetry, which was undoubtedly the most significant poetic achievement of the twentieth century before Pound, Yeats and Eliot. Sufficient it would be to recognise that during the twilight years of Victorian romanticism Hardy was grappling with problems which most of his contemporaries chose to ignore. I.A. Richards has placed Hardy among modern writers because he 'has courageously accepted the modern background', which Richards has described (in *Science and Poetry*) as 'the neutralization of nature'. Richards there speaks of the breaking down of traditional values which has resulted in great changes in the human situation, and he believes that Hardy reflects these changes and that the poet refuses to be comforted by any facile belief in imperialism or pantheism.

Pre-war England, then, presented a complex picture so far as English poetry was concerned. On the one hand, there were the Imperialists whose optimism and self-confidence produced poetry which was marked by blustering, chauvinistic sentiment. On the other hand, there were the Georgians whose poetry of piety, quietness and delicate observation hardly gave one the impression that they were writing at a time when there were tremendous social and intellectual upheavals, when Europe was heading towards war. In neither case did the poet subject himself to the painful realities around him. If the poet 'is the point at which the growth of mind shows itself',<sup>31</sup> then neither the Georgians nor the Imperialists measured up to this standard. Of course, the 'modernity' of a poet does not depend on his 'mentioning modern things, the apparatus of modern civilization'. In the words of F. R. Leavis, 'all that we can fairly ask of a poet is that

he shall show himself to have been fully alive in our time. The evidence will be in the very texture of his poetry.<sup>32</sup>

The third group of poets whom we have discussed above appear to represent the modern consciousness because they seem to be 'alive in our times'. No doubt, these poets did not make any deep impact on the contemporary poetic tendencies which were, despite the efforts of experimentalists like the Futurists, the Vorticists and the Imagists, under the firm control of the Imperialists and, later on, of the Georgians. But poets like Henley, Housman and Hardy proved to be prophetic of the course that English poetry was to take during the next few decades. This fact is generally overlooked, so that one gets the false impression that the English poetry of the pre-war years presented simply a confident, quiet, peaceful world which was suddenly shattered by the atrocities of war. Just as the war itself was not so unexpected<sup>33</sup> one can see a definite, though a less spectacular, trend in English poetry—not to speak of the other fields of art—of the pre-war years towards dealing with suffering, violence and a general sense of disintegration in modern life. This was the trend which, having been established by the war poets, became the central preoccupation of poets like Pound, Yeats and Eliot, who immersed themselves in the 'destructive element'. By doing so, they not only gave a conclusive picture of our condition but also of that which we might want to have.

## TWO

### *Poetry of the First World War*

THE BETTER-KNOWN poets of the First World War, with the exception of Rupert Brooke, did not have any kind of established literary reputation before they went to war and wrote about it. And it is reasonable to suppose that, but for the war, they might never have been the poets they turned out to be. They did not have any definite literary criteria or principles which they could apply to their war-experiences which, in any case, were unique in themselves. The disadvantage of such a lack of fixed poetic attitudes was that they could not 'distance' their experiences and see them in a wider human perspective. But the great advantage was that, free as they were from any preconceived notion about what poetry should or should not do in their particular situation, they wrote about what they saw and felt. In doing so they wrote not only a new kind of 'realistic' war poetry, but also profoundly influenced the course of modern English poetry. In the words of John Holloway, 'the length and intensity of the 1914-18 experience brought it about that English poetry of the more traditional and indigenous kind itself underwent a remarkable change, and one which ran parallel to those now more conspicuous changes initiated by Pound and Eliot'.<sup>1</sup> Those who seek a precedent for this kind of war poetry may perhaps find it in Hardy's *The Dynasts*, as has been claimed by A. Chakravarty in *The Dynasts and the Post-War Age in Poetry* (1938). But it is more likely that both the nature of the war, and the poetry that grew out of it, were unprecedented.

From the start, the war poets devoted themselves to the objective reality around them. Hence, their poetry has the freshness and authenticity of personal reactions. This is true even of the 'patriotic' poems that came out at the beginning of the war. Unfortunately, in an age in which the horror and crime of war have been turned into a glib axiom, the 'patriotic' poems of Brooke and Grenfell have been the subject of undeserved critical spleen. Patric Dickinson pinpointed this weakness in the common critical attitude towards the War Sonnets of Brooke, when he remarked:

Brooke was anything but a fool. Somehow his critics infer that he should have known as much in 1914 about the 'old bitch' as Pound knew safely afterwards. Confusion about time seems to me to bedevil much criticism of this period.<sup>2</sup>

A worse critical error of judgement is involved when poets like Brooke and Grenfell are dismissed as merely 'conventional' and 'traditional'. In one of the first full-length studies of the subject, Johnston makes the following sweeping, and inaccurate, generalisations:

Apparently oblivious of the causes, issues and practical effects, they (the early poets of that war) exploited the 'poetic' aspect of the situation and indulged themselves in romantic fantasies of honour, sacrifice, self-redemption, and immortality. These were safe, traditional themes which could provide numerous elegant variations; but they had nothing whatever to do with the objective historical reality, even when patriotism was the source of inspiration.<sup>3</sup>

If the logic behind branding Brooke's and Grenfell's poems as traditional is simply that their kind of 'patriotic' poetry is to be found in practically all periods of literary history, then, surely, there cannot be anything revolutionary in the poems of Sassoon, Owen and Rosenberg, whose literary predecessors in matters of the nastiness and brutality of war can be traced as far back as Euripides (*The Suppliants and Trojan Women*) and Shakespeare (*Troilus and Cressida*). The truth of the matter is that the poetry of the First World War (whether 'patriotic' or 'anti-war') was pretty unconventional because the poets' personal reactions as soldiers in war had few or no 'literary' precedents. The change that came about in the poetry of the war was due not to the imaginary fact that while the earlier poets were conventional, the later ones were revolutionaries, but to the real fact that the English poet, who was determined to write about the objective reality of war, changed as the subject itself revealed its more sinister aspects with the passage of time.

When poets like Brooke and Grenfell experienced a sudden burst of joy and enthusiasm at the outbreak of war, they were not indulging in 'romantic fantasies of honour, sacrifice, self-redemption and immortality'. They were, in fact, sharing the sense of exhilaration and freedom which was in the air then. Pinto recreates the spirit and tries to find an answer for it:

Part of the enthusiasm was certainly due to the sense of relief from the intolerable tension of the years preceding the war and from the drabness and monotony of the commercialized 'civilization', part probably to a sense of the breaking down of barriers of British insularity and a reassertion of unity with the rest of Europe and the outer world. Part of it also was the outcome of the moral sense derived from the English puritan tradition, which had been starved, corrupted but not killed in a world of competitive commerce, and which now seemed to have found an outlet in heroic action.<sup>4</sup>

And for a first-hand account of the mood of the period, we may go to J. B. Priestley, who has recalled:

There came, out of the unclouded blue of the summer, a challenge that was almost like conscription of the spirit, little to do really with King and Country and flag-waving and hip-hip-hurrah, a challenge to what we felt was our untested manhood. Other men who had not lived as easily as we had, had drilled and marched and borne arms—couldn't we? Yes, we too could leave our homes and soft beds and the girls to soldier for a spell, if there was some excuse for it, something at least to be defended. And here it was.<sup>5</sup>

It was not without significance that even a poet like Thomas Hardy shifted from his customary stance of tragic contemplation in order to sing of the 'rightness' of the war effort. In a sonnet, 'Song of the Soldiers', which he wrote on 5 September 1914, Hardy exclaimed:

In our heart of hearts believing  
 Victory crowns the just  
 And the braggarts must  
 Surely bite the dust  
 March we to the field ungrieving  
 In our heart of hearts believing  
 Victory crowns the just.

Even so solitary and melancholy a poet as Edward Thomas wrote to Bottomley in 1914: 'I have given up groaning since the war began, I believe, I have been mainly the better for it',<sup>6</sup> and wrote at least one poem ('This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong') in which, as an Englishman, he felt the rightness of 'The English cause'.

Is it surprising then that Rupert Brooke should have felt a similar sense of release and freedom? Unfortunately, he has been blamed, as he has been praised, for the wrong reasons. His personality has been made so legendary that it has always been difficult to retrieve his poetry from the legend. In his own time, he was shamelessly idolised and pampered, and Frances Cornford's well-known epigram bears testimony to this fact. His own romantic death, and Winston Churchill's prose elegy in the *Times*, seemed to perpetuate the myth about this astonishingly handsome young man. Even as late as 1967, Michael Hastings came out with a book about him entitled *The Handsomest Young Man in England*, which is replete with photographs and illustrations.

Apart from Edward Marsh's attempt to boost Brooke's literary reputation, the poet in him has generally been the target of adverse criticism. I. A. Richards found Brooke's poetry too abstract, and F. R. Leavis dismissed, with his typical iconoclasm, Brooke's talents as 'prolonged adolescence'.<sup>7</sup> Yet, an examination of his writings, letters and biographies shows that, though Brooke could often be rightly accused of being a clever adolescent, he was also a man of considerable intellectual and emotional resources. He was elected a Fellow at Cambridge on the basis of a dissertation on Webster. He was well-read in English literature, and was a great admirer of Donne at a time when the latter was in the process of being 'rediscovered'. He personally knew almost all the major poets of his time, including Hardy, Masfield and Yeats, the last of whom thought that Brooke was likely to be a considerable person if he got rid of his 'languid sensuality' and got in its place a 'robust sensuality'.<sup>8</sup> Eliot was impressed by his 'amazing felicity and command of language',<sup>9</sup> and Ezra Pound regarded him as 'the best of all that Georgian group'.<sup>10</sup> Brooke's better poems like 'The Fish', 'Dining-room Tea', 'Heaven' and 'Dust' show not only his skilful handling of metre and language but also a successful use of detached wit and irony. These poems display a mental agility which was something new to his contemporaries. Hence his poetry was criticised as being 'affected, complex and "literary"'.<sup>11</sup> But what really shocked the prim tastes of his reading public was his coarseness and brutal realism. Brooke, however, delighted in administering such shocks because he felt that it was necessary to do so at that time. Moreover, he believed that the Elizabethans' 'vitality' was inseparable from coarseness. Thus, when he was attacked for speaking of love and sea-sickness in the

same breath ('A Channel Passage'), he remarked that he had, in fact, succeeded in conveying the poignancy of a sea-sick lover's plight, a point that his accusers had missed.

The mysteries of love and death seemed particularly fascinating to him. Though in poems like the one beginning:

Oh! Death will find me, long before I tire  
Of watching you; and swing me suddenly  
Into the shade and loneliness and mire  
Of the last land!

the lyrical contemplation of death in the manner of Swinburne ('The Garden of Proserpine') hardly heralds a distinctive note, Brooke often introduced in his poems elements of wit, ambiguity and speculation. Hence a poem like 'Sonnet Suggested by Some of the Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research' strikes one as an interesting experiment at a time when English poetry was generally concerned with Imperialistic 'ideas' or bucolic pleasures:

Not with vain tears, when we're beyond the sun,  
We'll beat on the substantial doors, not tread  
Those dusty high-roads of the aimless dead  
Plaintive for Earth . . . .

Spend in pure converse our eternal day;  
Think each in each, immediately wise;  
Learn all we lacked before; hear, know and say  
What this tumultuous body now denies;  
And feel, who have laid our groping hands away;  
And see, no longer blinded by our eyes.

A perfectly articulated poem like this, with its skilful versification and effective phrasing (e.g., 'tumultuous body', 'blinded by our eyes'), is not just a piece of cleverness. The poem combines a lively intelligence with sensitive speculation. What is missing is perhaps deeper human experience. It is true that even in his best poems Brooke appears to substitute abstract intellectual reveries for actual human experiences. In his love poems, he holds the woman at an arm's length and indulges in fancies about her beauty or its gradual decay. In 'Jealousy' he imagines the worst for the girl, who chose a 'fool' in preference to the

poet. Brooke's biographers have revealed that he was psychologically unstable, with a streak of paranoia, and his condition was aggravated by his thwarted love-affairs. He was desperately in love with an Irish actress because 'she was the responsive and understanding Cathleen who believed in his genius and made allowances for his moods, and was able to treat him not as he deserved but as he desired'.<sup>12</sup> This gives an important clue to his personality, which found a yawning gulf between his expectations and reality. The 'reality', moreover, whether of beauty, love, or old age, became too bitter for him, and the only way he could deal with it was at the level of intellectual speculation. Nevertheless, his efforts in this direction produced some interesting poems, and it is reasonable to suppose that with greater human experience his poems would have achieved solidity.

We are, however, concerned here with his War Sonnets, which can be truly appreciated against the background of his poetic practices during pre-war years. When war broke out, he departed from his typical mood of introspective speculation, and concerned himself with the objective facts and prevailing feelings about the war. Though he glorified war, he had little in common with the Imperialist poets of his time, like Kipling, Newbolt and Noyes. A perusal of the historical account of *War and English Poetry*<sup>13</sup> will demonstrate how distinctive Brooke's patriotism was in contrast to that of the past poets, most of whom wrote about wars only from a safe distance. It is seldom realised that Brooke's and Grenfell's reaction to the war was as *personal* as that of Sassoon and Owen later on. Though he never went to the trenches, Brooke had first-hand experience of war during the Antwerp Expedition. He came to realize that, as a result of his military involvement, his 'Muse was no longer a laughing one'. His letters clearly reveal his great disappointment over the unexpected turn that his life and poetry had taken, but he tried to make the best of the predicament in which he found himself. In the first place, he felt that the war provided the much-needed challenge. In a letter to Mrs. Cornford he said: 'It's queer to see the people who *do* break under the strain of danger and responsibility. It's always the rotten ones. Highly sensitive people don't, queerly enough. I was relieved to find that I was incredibly brave!'<sup>14</sup> Moreover, he felt, during the early years of war, that he was fighting to prevent wrong and evil from spreading: 'And now I've the feeling of anger at a seen wrong—Belgium—to make me happier and more resolved in my work. I know that whatever happens, I'll do some good fight.



ing to prevent *that*.<sup>15</sup> This anticipated the attitudes of many poets of the Second World War, Keith Douglas, for instance. And like Douglas, Brooke also refused a safe job in the staff of his G.O.C.-in-C. Thus it should be apparent that far from being reckless and naive, Brooke's patriotic gesture grew out of a recognition of the realities of the time. And at that point in the history of the war, the need to fight 'bravely' seemed to justify the death and destruction that such a course necessarily involved.

One common hope, almost conviction, at the outbreak of war was that it would release man from the triviality and dreariness of day-to-day existence. C. M. Bowra detected the same mood in contemporary German poetry, the mood that arose out of a belief 'that only through some vast sacrifice and redemption could society be purged of its complacency and grossness'.<sup>16</sup> 'Peace' contains Brooke's expression of a similar hope:

Now God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour  
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,  
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,  
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,  
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,  
Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,  
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,  
And all the little emptiness of love!

It is true that it is hard to reconcile ourselves to the tragedy of war in terms of the chauvinism of Brooke's sonnets. Considered purely as poetry they remain unsatisfactory because, in their pursuit of patriotic ideals, they seem to avoid the deeper and darker truths of human existence. Brooke himself regarded only the last two of his five sonnets as 'good enough',<sup>17</sup> but it is as 'period pieces' that they are important, as showing not only what the general mood of the time was but also the difficulty that the modern poet was faced with when he was confronted by the subject of war. Just as Brooke could not, in the early years of war, see beyond the subject-matter that was immediately before him, the later war poets fell into a similar trap when, amidst the terrible conditions of trench warfare, 'no great event became luminous in (their) mind(s)'.<sup>18</sup> The war inspired a few hitherto unknown poets into making their finest utterances, but it muffled Brooke's real poetic voice. No one can legitimately claim that he was

a great poet, but he was a man of definite, if limited, poetic talents, which are revealed not in *Sonnets 1914*, but in poems like 'Tiare Tahiti', 'Dining-Room Tea', 'The Fish' and 'Dust'.

Though there were many other poems which glorified the war (e.g., Laurence Binyon's high-hearted 'For the Fallen', Robert Nichol's 'Farewell') it was Julian Grenfell's 'Into Battle' which became most famous, after Brooke's *Sonnets 1914*, for its idealising spirit. Grenfell was the eldest son of Lord Desborough, and was educated at Eton and Balliol. He was a man of high spirits, and loved games like buck-stalking, pig-sticking and polo. In 1910 he joined the Royal Dragoons, then stationed in India, and at the outbreak of the war found himself, with his regiment, in France in October 1914. He was twice mentioned in despatches, and was awarded the D.S.O. before he was killed in May 1915. Though he had written a few 'songs' Grenfell was not known as a poet before the publication of 'Into Battle'. He had sent home the manuscript of the poem only a week before he died, and it was published in the *Times* on 27 May 1915.

The poem obviously grew out of his war experiences as a professional soldier. Writing from Flanders, he had expressed his excitement at, and an animal enjoyment of, warfare:

Here we are, in the burning centre of it all, and I would not be anywhere else for a million pounds and the Queen of Sheba . . . I have never, never felt so well, so happy, or enjoyed anything so much. It just suits my stolid health, and stolid nerves and barbaric disposition. The fighting-excitement vitalizes everything, every sight and word of action. One loves one's fellow-man so much more when one is bent on killing him.<sup>19</sup>

The perversity of the last line can be explained in terms of the key phrase of the passage, 'barbaric disposition', which in turn characterises best the mood of 'Into Battle'. the mood that can be described as one of animal energy, untamed by intellectual or moral scruples or fears. The war gave Grenfell the opportunity to demonstrate his dashing love of battle and his courage, which his gentlemanly upbringing, education and training had taught him.

When one has in mind a poem like Owen's 'Spring Offensive' where the natural phenomena put into sharp relief the unnaturalness of fighting, one is struck by the terrible naivety and self-contemplation

of 'Into Battle'. Nature is seen here as organically related to the soldiers, and death in the battlefield is viewed as sacrificial death, like renewal in nature. A typical example of this is the stanza in which the soldier is exhorted to be 'swift' and 'keen' like the kestrel and the owl. And, appropriately enough, the soldierly virtues of patience and courage are instilled in him, not by leaders and generals, but by horses:

The horses show him nobler powers  
O patient eyes, courageous hearts!

It is not accidental that animal imagery is predominant in this poem, which extolls brutal energy. It ends with an unthinking ('Not caring much to know') cheerfulness and a romantic attitude towards predictable death:

Through joy and blindness he shall know,  
Not caring much to know, that still  
Nor lead nor steel shall reach, so  
That it be not the Destined Will.

And the thundering line of battle stands,  
And in the air death moans and sings;  
And day shall clasp him with strong hands,  
And night shall fold him in soft wings.

The study of 'Into Battle' (written in April 1915) is significant in the history of modern war poetry because it shows that though it was possible, in the early months of the war, to see the objective facts in terms of chivalric ideals, it became more and more difficult to do so as the war revealed its terrible realities. Though Sir Walter Raleigh had obviously meant to pay a compliment when, on reading 'Into Battle', he said, 'It can't be done again', subsequent developments in poetry, and modern sensibility, have proved that the words were *ironically* true.

The poetry of chivalrous obligation, where poets like Brooke and Grenfell concerned themselves with sentiments more important than death, and with the beauty and ideals of England, which they were going to defend, soon became outmoded as the horrors of trench war-

fare became the most immediate reality. When the soldier-poets *personally* experienced the brutalities of war, they came to the grim realisation that their hopes and ideals, which had earlier provided them with sufficiently valid motives for participating in the war, were lies, or at best irrelevant. What was more, they felt that the people who were safely at home were callously ignorant of the realities of war, and carried it on for their own selfish ends, without taking into account the suffering that it entailed for the fighting soldiers. And this resulted in a sharp division among the British people, a division which Pinto<sup>20</sup> has described as 'the Nation at Home' and 'the Nation Overseas'. Curiously enough, English poetry, which had glorified England and all the qualities of English life at home, now turned fiercely against those very idols. Pinto goes on to point out that for an English soldier in the trenches it was not the Germans so much as the British civilians and administrators who became his chief enemies. This change of mood is central to an understanding of the chief merits as well as the severe limitations of the poetry of the First World War. It became the poet's main concern to portray the terrible realities of modern warfare, and to thrust it into the face of the callous civilians. The outcome of this poetic attitude was that while, on the positive side, the poet wrote poetry of indignation and, at its best, of deep compassion, on the negative side this poetry degenerated into propaganda, hysterical protest and passive suffering.

'Realism' became the watchword for the soldier-poets, for whom all illusions were shattered by the brutal and unrewarding battles of Verdun and Somme in 1916. As an unflinching realist, Douglas Jerrold remarked in *The Lie About The War* (1930), 'it is here we get back to the truth—unromantic, unchivalrous, unadventurous, unadorned by the marvellous, the epic or the obscene, simply WAR'. In our discussion of the poetry written in England during pre-war years we had found that the limited kind of realism that Georgian poetry contained consisted of noting the actual sights and sounds of nature, and recording the dull, drab details of urban life. This 'realistic' approach, when directed towards the war, produced verses which were bare and stark, with little feeling and less thought. One of the older Georgians, Gibson, wrote self-contained poems like the following one, which is exclusively concerned with bare facts:

I watched it oozing quietly  
Out of the gaping gash.

The lads thrust onto victory  
 With lunge and crush and crash....

The lads thrust on to victory  
 With lunge and crash and shout  
 I lay and watched, as quietly  
 His life was running out.

(‘Victory’)

The better war poetry is, of course, more complex than this simple-minded actualism of Gibson.

Charles Hamilton Sorley represents one of the early examples of a complex attitude to war. It is interesting that though he wrote his poems at about the same time as Brooke and Grenfell did (Brooke, Grenfell and Sorley died in April, May and October 1915, respectively), Sorley’s verses do not seem to echo the patriotic enthusiasm of the early years of war. He himself was aware of this difference in his attitude, for, when he wrote a poem (‘Whom Therefore We Ignorantly Worship’), in September 1914, he remarked in a letter, ‘I think it should get a prize for being the first poem written since August 4th that isn’t patriotic’.<sup>21</sup> The absence of patriotism in his poetry can be explained not only in terms of his special literary background, but also (on a practical level) by the fact that he had recently returned from a visit to Germany, and had fallen in love with the country and its people.

Sorley was born in 1895 at Aberdeen, the son of a professor at Aberdeen University who later on went to teach at Cambridge. Sorley went to Marlborough College, and in 1913 he won a scholarship to University College, Oxford. However, before going to Oxford next autumn, he spent three months at Schwerin in Mecklenberg, and for a brief period attended lectures at the University of Jena. At the outbreak of war, he arrived in England on 6 August 1914, and the next morning applied for a commission. He became a 2/Lt. in the Suffolk Regiment. From September 1914 to May 1915 he underwent military training in England, and was sent to France late in May. He served his regiment in trenches around Ploegsteert during the summer and was promoted to the rank of Captain. On 13 October 1915, he was shot and killed by a sniper near Hulluch.

Sorley was in the Western Front only for four and a half months,

but both his letters and earlier verses show a highly intelligent awareness of the deeper implications of war and death. The development of his precocious mind is best reflected in his letters, which were published by Cambridge University Press in 1919, and enthusiastically reviewed by Middleton Murry.<sup>22</sup> However, there is always the danger of confusing Sorley the poet with Sorley the writer of the letters. On reading his prose, as well as poetry, one gets the impression that, during his brief life, Sorley's mind matured rapidly, and was enriched by new experiences, all of which he could not transmute into poetry.

Sorley's literary consciousness grew at a time when there was a general reaction against the 'Decadents' and the 'Aesthetes' of the previous decades. He himself was a seeker of truth, and it was for the truthfulness of both sentiment and diction that he hailed Masfield as the pioneering poet of, what he called, the 'XXth Century Renaissance': 'Masfield writes that he knows and testifies that he has seen. with him expression is the fruit of action. the sweat of a body the has passed through the fire.'<sup>23</sup> As for 'the representative of the Victorian age', Sorley had this to say:

A paltry poet in general, Tennyson is preeminently paltry and superficial when he sings about nature and earth. He was not long in hedging her in with the shapely corsets of alliterative verbiage.<sup>24</sup>

He was also dissatisfied with much of the poetry of his time, and went on to remark, 'it pleases, it flatters, it charms, it soothes: it is a living lie'.<sup>25</sup>

With an almost boyish enthusiasm Sorley adopted, and discarded, in quick succession, literary idols like Masfield, Meredith and Goethe. But it appears that Hardy remained for him the greatest poet:

I cannot help thinking that Hardy is the greatest artist of the English character since Shakespeare and much of *The Dynasts* (except its historical fidelity) might be Shakespeare. But I value his lyrics as presenting himself (the self that he does not obtrude into comprehensiveness of his novels and *The Dynasts*) as truly, and with faults as well as strength visible in it, as any character in his novels. His lyrics have not the spontaneity of Shakespeare's or Shelley's, they are rough-hewn and jagged: but I like them and they stick.<sup>26</sup>

He was, however, not an uncritical admirer of Hardy. In fact, in a letter to his parents written on 30 November 1914, Sorley took the elder poet to task for deviating from truth when he wrote 'Men Who March Away', praising the war efforts of the English soldiers.

However, in general, Sorley was sufficiently influenced by Hardy to believe that human life was overshadowed by a cosmic tragedy. This being so, he thought it stupid that people should quarrel among themselves for nationalistic or patriotic reasons. After his visit to Germany he had developed a special fondness and admiration for the Germans. He could not, therefore, hate them even when the war broke out. On the other hand, he was able to view the conflict with detachment. He came to realise that 'there is no such thing as a just war. What we are doing is casting out Satan by Satan',<sup>27</sup> and went on to remark about the need to take into account the deeper implications of human existence:

Indeed, I think that after the war all brave men will renounce their country and confess that they are strangers and pilgrims on the earth. . . but all these convictions are useless for me to state since I have had not the courage of them. What a worm one is under the cartwheels—big, clumsy, careless, lumbering cartwheels—of public opinion. I might have been giving my mind to fight against Sloth and Stupidity; instead, I am giving my body (by a refinement of cowardice) to fight against the most enterprising nation in the world.<sup>28</sup>

Out of this largeness of spirit grew his impressive and well-known sonnet 'To Germany', which is largely Hardyesque in sentiment and diction, without the melody and flow of Georgian verse:

You are blind like us. Your hurt no man designed,  
And no man claimed the conquest of your land.  
But gropers both through fields of thought confined  
We stumble and do not understand.  
You only saw your future bigly planned,  
And we, the tapering paths of our own mind,  
And in each other's dearest ways we stand  
And hiss and hate. And the blind fight the blind.

This was written in August 1914. A month later, he wrote another

poem on similar lines in which he goes a step further, and views humanity as helpless and aimless before an inscrutable destiny:

A hundred thousand million mites we go  
 Wheeling and tracking o'er the eternal plain,  
 Some black with death—and some white with woe.  
 Who sent us forth? Who takes us home again?

.....

And there is murmuring of the multitude  
 And blindness and great blindness, until some  
 Step forth and challenge blind Vicissitude  
 Who tramples on them: so that fewer come.  
 ('A Hundred Thousand Million Mites We Go')

The rhetorical tone of the above lines is not able to conceal the absence of that *personal* involvement in a cosmic tragedy which was to distinguish a poem like Owen's 'The Show' later on. The poem seems to reverberate with echoes of Hardy's *The Dynasts*, or the sonnet 'Hap': instead of Hardy's 'Cross Casualty' we have Sorley's 'Vicissitude'. But Sorley's individual voice is heard when he expresses the hope that, after the war is over, the warring soldiers would grow

more loving—kind and warm  
 We'll grasp firm hands and laugh at the old pain.  
 ('To Germany')

His hope sounds more mature and convincing because it is born in spite of his recognition of the tragedy involved. Sorley was, in fact, sharing the commonly held belief, in the earlier stages of the war, that 'it (the war) will purge these two virtues of their vices, and efficiency and tolerance will no longer be incompatible'.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, these poems are important for showing that, just before going to the trenches, Sorley was viewing the war with a detached as well as catholic spirit, and 'this spirit', in the words of Robert Nichols, 'appears steadfastly set upon subduing subjectivism and upon viewing what lay around him as a whole and with himself and his poetry as only part of the whole'.<sup>30</sup>

Sorley was a lover of nature, and it finds its proper place in his all-



inclusive vision of life. Right from the very beginning, he loved the countryside around Marlborough and he enjoyed his walks and runs in the Downs.

In one of his earlier poems, he expressed joy and exhilaration in nature:

We swing ungirded hips,  
And lightened are our eyes,  
The rain is in our lips,  
We do not run for the prize,

We know not whom we trust  
Nor witherward we fare,  
But we run because we must  
Through the great wide air.

(*"The Song of the Ungirt Runner"*)

But this joy in nature goes with a consciousness of the 'tearing tempests', storms and winds of the last two stanzas. In another poem, 'Stones', a walk in fields covered with white flints arouses in him deeper human emotions as he contemplates on the pre-historic lives that lie buried there:

This field is almost white with stones  
That cumbers all its thirsty crust  
And underneath, I know are bones  
And all around is death and dust.

In contrast to the Georgians' obsession with nature's 'prettiness', Sorley was drawn towards the rain and storm in nature, a quality which Robert Graves celebrated in a poem called 'Sorley's Weather', which has been quoted in full by Sorley's biographer, Thomas Burnett Swann.<sup>31</sup> It is true that nature was a source of great joy to him, but that joy, instead of being an 'escapist pleasure', seemed to be something 'spiritual' though he was not able to define it precisely:

I, who have walked along her downs in dreams,  
And known her tenderness, and felt her might,  
And sometimes by her meadows and her streams  
Have drunk deep-storied secrets of delight,  
Have had my times, when, though the earth did wear  
Her self-same trees and grasses, I could see

The revelation that is always there,  
But somehow is not always clear to me.

(‘Marlborough’)

In ‘All the Hills And Vales Along’, which is perhaps the very first poem that he wrote after his enlistment in the army, the goodness in nature is seen in ironic contrast to human frustrations and failures. The opening lines of the poem:

All the hills and vales along  
Earth is bursting into song

might immediately relegate it into the category of Grenfell’s ‘Into Battle’, where the emotions aroused by nature are identified with those of the brave soldiers. But in the very next lines, a different note is struck:

And the singers are the chaps  
Who are going to die perhaps.

The joy in nature is ironically contrasted with the soldiers’ march to death. The casual indifference of nature to the human aspirations (of the ‘chaps’) is traced through history, and the inevitable death of the soldiers is viewed as just another aspect of cosmic processes:

Earth that never doubts nor fears  
Earth that knows of death, nor tears  
Earth that bore with joyful ease  
Hemlock for Socrates,  
Earth that blossomed and was glad,  
‘Neath the cross that Christ had,  
Shall rejoice and blossom too  
When the bullet reaches you.

Here is no easy escape into a timid retreat or a naive lapse into pathetic fallacy, but a Housmanesque recognition of the indifference of nature to human fate. And a sardonic collision is brought about between the bounty of nature and the doom of human life.

However, one has the suspicion that such attitudes of Sorley’s were ‘literary’ (borrowed mainly from his masters, Hardy and Housman)

and unsubstantiated by deep personal experiences. Such suspicions achieve validity when we find that as a result of his personal experiences in the trenches, the complex and subtle treatment of nature is replaced by a simplistic, nostalgic yearning for its beauties. The poem beginning 'I Have Not Brought My Odyssey' evokes, 'from the battered trenches', a nostalgic picture of familiar landscape:

And soon, O soon, I do not doubt it,  
With the body or without it,  
We shall all come tumbling down  
To our old wrinkled-red-capped town.  
Perhaps the road up Isley way  
The old ridge-track will be my way.

Sorley himself was aware of the different demands made by his changed circumstances. When the prospect of his own active participation in the war became imminent, he wrote a poem called 'Lost' in December 1914, in which he movingly expressed his departure from his 'past imaginings', and looked to the future years with uncertain apprehension:

Across my past imaginings  
Has dropped a blindness silent and slow.  
My eye is bent on other things  
Than those it once did see and know.

Shortly after arriving in France, in June 1915, he wrote in reply to the suggestion that he might publish his poems, '...this is no time for oliveyards and vineyards, more specially of the small-holding type. For three years or the duration of the war, let be.'<sup>32</sup> He had spent about four and a half months in actual combat before he was killed. During this short period, he had little time to extricate himself from his personal experiences in order to evaluate them objectively for poetic purposes. In fact, only eight days before he was shot down, he wrote:

...perhaps afterwards, I and my like will again become indiscriminate rebels. For the present we find high relief in making ourselves soldiers.<sup>33</sup>

He wrote only six poems in the summer of 1915. Three of them deal with 'past imaginings', but the three others are concerned with death, which was presumably weighing on his mind. In the first of the 'Two Sonnets', written in June 1915, he speaks of his confrontation with death, to whose reality he had hitherto been a stranger:

You, so familiar, once were strange: we tried  
To live as of your presence unaware.  
But now in every road on every side  
We see your straight and steadfast signpost there.

And in the next sonnet he tries to define the nature of death as the end of all human experiences:

Such and such is Death: no triumph: no defeat:  
Only an empty pail, a slate rubbed clean,  
A merciful putting away of what has been.

This sonnet, however, ends with the following lines:

But a big blot has hid each yesterday  
So poor, so manifestly incomplete.  
And your bright promise, withered long and sped,  
Is touched, stirs, rises, opens and grows sweet  
And blossoms and is you, when you are dead.

Sorley's house-master Gidney,<sup>34</sup> and more recently John Press, see the above lines as 'the prelude to a richer life',<sup>35</sup> but probably they are ironical. This impression becomes deeper when one puts alongside this sonnet Rupert Brooke's sonnet 'IV Death' in which Brooke seems to express similar sentiments about death. Johnston<sup>36</sup> rightly contrasts the mellifluousness of Brooke's verse with the bare and harsh image in Sorley's sonnet, e.g., the signpost, the empty or broken pail, the clean slate. Brooke sees death as a transformation into immortality:

He leaves a white  
Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance  
A width, a shining piece, under the night.

But Sorley's 'bright promise' and 'blossoms' are intended romanticisms, expressed through deliberate choice of words, which collide with the harsh imagery and the bleak sentiments ('no triumph: no defeat') of the earlier lines producing thereby a sense of tragic irony.

The last sonnet in this group, 'When You See Millions of The Mouthless Dead', is a further attempt at viewing death in its stark reality, stripped of the tinsel and romance with which it had been clothed in the early stages of the war:

When you see millions of the mouthless dead  
 Across your dreams in pale battalions go,  
 Say not soft things as other men have said,  
 That you'll remember. For you need not so,  
 Give them not praise. For deaf, how should they know  
 It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?  
 Nor tears. The blind eyes see not your tears flow.  
 Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.

This clearly sounds like a rejoinder to Brooke's war sonnets. It is well known that Sorley had condemned Brooke for taking 'the sentimental attitude' towards war. In his own sonnet, Sorley discovers the irrelevance of praise, tears or honour in the face of death. In discussing the attitudes of these two poets towards death, the time factor must be taken into consideration. Whereas Brooke wrote his sonnet in August 1914, Sorley wrote his criticism of Brooke, as well as his sonnet under discussion, in the summer of 1915, by which time the complexion of the war had changed for the worse. The intensity of this terrible reality also burns out Sorley's 'literary' stance towards death, and therefore prevents him from seeing it with Hardy-esque detachment and cosmic vision as he had tried to do in his pre-war poems. In a letter dated 28 November 1914, Sorley had quoted Achilles' line, 'Died Petroclus too who was a better man than thou?', adding 'no saner or splendider comment on death has been made'.<sup>37</sup> The sense of a cruel waste is central to the poem, and in the last lines death is seen as a great leveller which kills the great and the small all alike:

Say only this, 'They are dead.' Then add thereto  
 'Yet many a better one has died before.'  
 Then scanning all the o'ercrowded mass, should you

Perceive one face that you<sup>u</sup> loved heretofore,  
 It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.  
 Great death has made all his evermore.

Admittedly, these war poems of Sorley's, with their relatively straightforward conception of death, are a little disappointing, especially in view of the high promise held out by his earlier poems' (and letters') comprehensive outlook and complex attitudes. But he died very young, and had little time to adjust to the new realities and experiences. Nevertheless, these few poems help us to see how very difficult it was for a poet of the First World War to see things objectively. Though Sorley had started with an adequate literary and personal background, which might have enabled him to see war as only one aspect of the human condition—that 'we are strangers and pilgrims on this earth'—his personal participation in its unimagined brutalities prevented him from viewing it in anything but partial terms.

This central dilemma of the poets of the First World War was best exemplified in the works of Siegfried Sassoon, who entered the war as a more mature man than most of his compatriots, and who lived through it. Under the stress of immediate personal experiences he was not able to distance his subject-matter for poetic purposes. Later in life he realised the desirability 'to depict it (war) impersonally, and to be as much "above the battle" as I could'.<sup>38</sup> Though this was a salutary after-thought, at the time when he wrote his poems he was like most of his contemporaries, unable to lift his poetry above 'reportage'. Edmund Blunden saw the danger when he remarked that, 'in a sense, as the Great War unmasked its ugliness, the problem of the legion of soldier-poets was primarily one of reporting'.<sup>39</sup> A poet like Robert Graves, who had actively participated in the war—he was severely wounded during the Somme Offensive—wrote a series of war poems which appeared in *Over the Brazier* (1916) and *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917). The lack of subtlety with which he dealt with the theme of war has been ably demonstrated by G. S. Fraser, who has compared Graves's 'A Dead Boche' with Keith Douglas's 'Vergissmeinnicht'.<sup>40</sup> This examination brilliantly shows the poetic potentialities in the war theme which Graves, and most other poets of his time, were unwilling, or more appropriately *unable*, to exploit at that period of time. Graves, of course, wisely suppressed his war poems, but Sassoon apparently felt that his limited poetic talent found

its outlet best in his war poems. However, it must be pointed out that, however inadequate they may be, his war poems are historically important for reflecting the mood of the soldiers, who grew more and more disillusioned as the war went on revealing its meaningless brutalities. For expressing the mood of anger and disillusionment of the times, Sassoon's volumes *The Old Huntsman* (1917) and *Counter-Attack* (1918) won him the literary fame that he had not known before, and was not to achieve with his post-war poetry.

Sassoon grew up in a country gentleman's home, with hunting and poetry as his chief pleasures. His verses were privately printed, and they were mainly descriptive and meditative. He delighted in the peaceful aspects of nature which he viewed with the solitary-mindedness of a young poet. The very titles of his poems—'Before Day', 'Dryad', 'Morning Land', 'Daybreak in a Garden'—are an index to the kind of poetry he wrote. He was admitted into the circle of Edward Marsh, and he contributed to the Georgian anthologies. However his single literary achievement before the war can be said to have been 'The Daffodil Murderer' (1913), which was an ingenious parody of Masfield's then famous 'Everlasting Mercy'. This poem, which Sassoon chose to leave out of his *Collected Poems* (1947), does little to alter the picture of him (during pre-war years) as a country gentleman, who had no serious quarrel with the world, his position, or the society in which he lived.

This is borne out by the fact that, in his early war poems, Sassoon whole-heartedly echoed Brooke's sentiment that war was a heroic deliverance ('Absolution'). In 'To My Brother', the death of a fellow-soldier is regarded as an example of selfless courage, and meaningful because it would lead to a just victory:

Your lot is with the ghosts of soldiers dead,  
And I am in the field where men must fight.  
But in the gloom I see your laurell'd head  
And through your victory I shall win the fight.

Robert Graves has left an account, in *Goodbye To All That*, of Sassoon's early enthusiasm and bravery in battle-fields. For his reckless courage Sassoon was known as 'Mad-Jack', and for his heroism in bringing back the wounded after a raid opposite Mametz he was awarded the Military Cross. Sassoon was not prepared, then, for the horrors of war which might radically alter his picture of the world. He defined

peace, to quote Graves, 'in terms of hunting, nature and music and pastoral scene',<sup>41</sup> so that, left to himself, he would have been content to write agreeable poems about non-controversial subjects and pastoral themes.

But the war gave a severe jolt to him, as it did to many of his contemporaries. In the first place, the wholesale massacre on the Somme and at Arras removed the last vestiges of 'patriotism' which were still there in the soldiers, and filled them with revulsion and dismay. They questioned the very motives of the war, and strongly suspected that it was being prolonged by the civilians for their own greed and ambition. Since for them the *raison d'être* of the war had disappeared, they became more acutely conscious of the physical and mental agonies of life in the trenches. And because they held the civilians responsible for their terrible predicament, they directed their anger at them. Graves, in his *Goodbye To All That*, gives a vivid picture of the gradual isolation of the 'Nation Overseas' from the 'Nation at Home'. He also quotes Sassoon's 'A Soldier's Declaration' (July 1917) as a document that embodied the general feelings of the soldiers at that time. Sassoon's utterances were regarded by the authorities as the outbursts of a shell-shocked mind, so he was promptly despatched to Craiglockhart Infirmary as a patient of a neurologist.

Sassoon had already started his battle against war and the authorities on a literary front. His personal involvement in the war made him aware of its nightmarish realities which he decided to thrust at the face of the smug civilians at home. This he did by writing realistic poems about war, even though he found it difficult to do so in view of his Georgian background. Bernard Bergonzi has aptly commented on Sassoon's earlier difficulties in writing realistic verse:

In some ways Sassoon was not particularly well equipped for the role of a ruthless realist. His basic, strongly Georgian sensibility and background were very inclined to see man and his surroundings in some kind of harmony, no matter how precarious.<sup>42</sup>

It is interesting to see how Sassoon started to write 'realistic' sketches in the Georgian mode eventually to give it up. It was not until 1916 that he began to write realistic poems about life in the trenches, and his earlier war poems like 'Golgotha' and 'A Working Party' show the poet's attempt at dealing with war's realities in terms of Georgian sensibility and technique. The opening lines of 'Golgotha'



present a generalized picture of the scene at the front with wistful sadness:

Through darkness curves a spume of falling flares  
That flood the field with shadow, blanching light.  
The huddled sentry stares  
On gloom at war with white,  
And white receding slow, submerged in gloom.

Similarly, in the other poem, there is a telling but a pretty straightforward description of a soldier's wretched plight, very much in the descriptive manner of Gibson.

But he very soon discovered that though the Georgian method could not do justice to the fierce theme of war's atrocities, the Georgian outlook on life and nature could be used for ironic purposes. The familiar landscape of 'the little England' when seen through the bloodshot eyes of a wounded soldier, revealed its fragility and impermanence, if not its unreality:

But was he back in Blighty? Slow he turned,  
Till in his heart thanksgiving leapt and burned.  
There shone the blue serene, the prosperous land,  
Trees, cows and hedges; skipping these, he scanned  
Large, friendly names, that change not with the year,  
Lung Tonic, Mustard, Liver Pills and Beer.

(*'Stretcher Case'*)

Sassoon was more concerned with presenting the contrast between the peaceful world and the war-torn world than with seeing both the worlds as parts of total human consciousness. That was because he saw war as a fact for which only the politicians and profiteers were responsible, and not as a reflection of the 'inner war' within each individual, as poets and writers came to see it in subsequent decades. So the problem was a simple one for Sassoon: there was the tragedy of war, and there were the perpetrators of it—the politicians who waged it, and the civilians who tacitly supported it. His poetry therefore had the twin aims of portraying the suffering of the war-victims, and lashing out at the insensitive 'brass hats' and the civilians who caused it. In *'The Redeemer'*, he identifies the soldier ironically, almost jocularly, with suffering Christ, and goes on to contrast the wretched-

ness of his condition with that of the 'peaceful folks' at home. 'They' embodies a more vigorous condemnation of the ignorance, false optimism and hypocrisy of which the Bishop of the poem is a symbol:

The Bishop tells us: 'When the boys come back  
'They will not be the same; for they'll have fought  
'In a just cause: ...'

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.  
'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;  
'Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;  
'And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find  
'A chap who's served that hasn't found *some* change.'

Under the urgency of the 'message', the formalities of poetic technique are ignored. In this twelve-lined stanza, the poet felt no need to regulate his raw emotions of anger and hatred. The result is that the poem is one of brash satire rather than one in which questions of morality and religion come under serious reconsideration. In place of the easy flow and conventional imagery of Georgian verse, there is the use of the colloquial vocabulary of the 'boys'. This method proved very effective at that time. Sassoon had later on remarked that he was perhaps the first English poet to have used the word 'syphilitic' in verse. The use of such words was part of a general strategy for shocking his audience.

'They' proved to be prophetic of Sassoon's poetic practices for the remaining years of the war, because as the war dragged on he became more and more obsessed with the subject-matter. He became a conscious propagandist, and chose the verse-medium as his means of propaganda. This fact underlined the limitations of his poetic achievement. In the autumn of 1917, when he was convalescing at Craiglockhart Infirmary, he got hold of the English translation of Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* in which the French novelist had presented, in the manner of Zola, graphic pictures of the violence and destruction of war. Sassoon was greatly influenced by it. Many of his poems which appeared in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (1918), were, written at this time, and the effect of the novel on the poems can be judged by the fact that a paragraph from *Le Feu* appears as an epigraph to his volume.

These poems are not much different from those in the previous volume except that the old themes are tackled more vigorously and vociferously. There is a greater concentration in a poem like 'Counter-Attack' where the description of the corpses huddled together is done in a language that is intense and powerful. The smug civilians again come under attack in 'Suicide in The Trenches':

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye  
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,  
Sneak home and pray you'll never know  
The hell where youth and laughter go.

Even women at home, who had been spared earlier, get their share of the soldiers' anger and contempt in 'Glory of Women' and 'Their Frailty'. In short, Sassoon was intent on presenting the great division that grew between the fighting soldiers and the civilians. That, in time, led to a greater loyalty and fraternity among the soldiers themselves. Both as an officer and a poet, Sassoon felt it his duty to express the poignant and angry feelings of the soldiers who were not articulate enough to do so themselves. He (and later on Owen) wrote poems in which his individual suffering was related to the collective agony of all the soldiers. When Sassoon went on sick-leave, the thought of his fellow-soldiers in the trenches haunted him:

In bitter safety I awake, unfriended;  
And while the dawn begins with slashing rain  
I think of the Battalion in the mud.  
'When are you going out to them again?  
Are they not still your brothers through our blood?

(*'Sick-Leave'*)

This is quite impressive, but this was as far as Sassoon could go. Owen, as we shall see later on, went a step further, and saw *all* the soldiers—friends and foes—as worthy of his compassion and concern.

Sassoon, however, concentrated on what was more immediate and what came within the focus of his own experiences. His unwillingness, or his inability, to go deeper beneath the facts of life and experience become flagrantly apparent in his poems about death. Unlike the better war poets—especially of the Second World War—for whom war brought about a confrontation with the mysteries

of death, Sassoon is content with just stripping death of its conventional glories. He caricatures the romantic attitudes, which glorified death in battle, in a poem like 'How To Die' and makes clever use of romantic expressions like 'holy brightness breaks into flame' and 'Radiance reflected' which conceal irony and anger:

The dying soldier shifts his head  
To watch the glory that returns;  
He lifts his fingers toward the skies  
Where holy brightness breaks in flame;  
Radiance reflected in his eyes,  
And on his lips a whispered name.

Death kindled not deep contemplation our passionate hysteria in Sassoon. He is very much like the soldier in the poem 'Lamentation' who becomes hysterical with grief on discovering that his brother has died:

. . .it was no good trying  
To stop it; for he howled and beat his chest.  
And, all because his brother had gone west,  
Raved at the bleeding war; his rampant grief  
Moaned, shouted, sobbed, and choked, while he was kneeling  
Half-naked on the floor. In my belief  
Such men have lost all patriotic feeling.

It appears that all the accumulated details of grief and moaning have been brought out in order to yield the irony contained in the last lines about the loss of patriotic feelings. The poem, therefore, is not about death or grief so much as about the dubious merits of patriotism.

This points to the characteristic weakness of Sassoon's war poetry as a whole. As early as 1918, John Middleton Murry came out with a perceptive evaluation of Sassoon as a poet when he reviewed (anonymously) *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*.<sup>43</sup> The opening paragraph of the review shows that the critic is not prepared to be swayed by mere sentiment in judging poetic achievement. It is understandable that Sassoon's poems were popular when they first came out for the very reasons which contributed to their artistic inadequacies. They faithfully recorded the inhumanity and brutality of war, and the rage and indignation of a sensitive man. But they lacked art because the

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poet was incapable of, what Murry called, 'intellectual remoteness':

The experiences of battle, awful, inhuman and intolerable as they are, are only experiences for the mind which is capable of bringing their horrors and their inhumanity home to the imagination of others. Without the perspective that comes from intellectual remoteness there can be no order and no art. Intellectual remoteness is not cold and callous; it is the condition in which a mind works as a mind, and a man is fully active as a man. Because this is wanting in Mr. Sassoon we are prey to uneasiness when confronted with his work.

Sassoon chose the role of a prophet and a propagandist, and used satire as his chief weapon. His diction and verse technique are unremarkable because they were subdued to his basic propagandistic intentions. He used polemical verse and colloquial diction, and achieved the desired result by their bald banality and doggerel roughness.

But it must be admitted that though Sassoon never went deeper into the essential nature of the conflict and the crisis, his fierce indignation resulted in some telling poetic utterances. This was a far cry from the pre-war mood which had produced his quiet, pietist poems of country pleasures and wistful solitude. Yet, he remained essentially a poet of Georgian sensibilities. After the war, he tried to revert to his former role, and in 1928, he published *The Heart's Journey*, the invocation of which shows his attempt to go back to former times:

Soul, be my song; return arrayed in white;  
Lead home the loves that I have wronged and slain;  
Bring back the summer dawns that banished night....  
Time's way-worn traveller I. And you, O song,  
O soul, my Paradise laid waste so long.

It is almost incredible that these lines, with their romantic sentiments and imagery, are from the poet of those fierce war poems. However, it was difficult for him to return to the Georgian mode because he had been forced, not by temperament but only by circumstances, to discover the limitations of the Georgian sensibility. Unfortunately, he did not have the imaginative and intellectual resources to make poetic use of such a discovery in his later life. On the contrary, he regretted the shattering of his peaceful world. In a sense, his sensi-

bility was crippled by war. He gives the impression of a man whose imagination was fixed in the years 1914-1918, as if nothing happened in the subsequent years.\* In 1933 he went back, as it were, and wrote a group of satirical poems about war under the title *The Road To Ruin*. They perhaps sounded a little anachronistic in 1933, and they reaffirm one's suspicion that Sassoon could at his best only elucidate war, and not interpret it in a wider human context. Nevertheless, by merely concentrating on the exposure of war's horrors, he made a significant contribution to the development of modern war poetry.

Wilfred Owen went a step further. In fact, he seems to have taken this kind of war poetry as far as it would go by creating his highly impressive 'poetry of pity'. He started, as a war poet, from the basic position of his acknowledged model Sassoon, but without resting content with the negative emotions of anger and hatred aroused by satirical verse, he evoked positive feelings of pity and compassion.<sup>44</sup> Pity for the soldiers who were suffering and dying in the trenches, and anger against the insensitive civilians and politicians, became the chief emotions out of which he was able to create moving poetry. This poetry has had a tremendous appeal for its humanity and nobility. But now, when we can see the horrors of that war in a historical perspective from a distance of more than fifty years, when we realise that the belief that the war could have been avoided was a myth or, at best, wishful thinking, when we find from the practices of the major poets of the Second World War that war can be best dealt with as an essential component of modern poetic consciousness, we begin to see weaknesses in Owen's 'poetry of pity'. W. B. Yeats's charge that such war poetry was marked by 'passive suffering' seems quite relevant. Owen, like the other poets of the First World War, was so overwhelmed by the catastrophe of war that he could not view it objectively as another symbol of the tragedy that pervades human existence. He saw it as a monstrous event which relentlessly crushed innocent soldiers, and the *only* way he could accept this terrible fact was by feeling, and expressing, deep pity.

\*Interestingly, in his life too, Sassoon gave a similar impression. In a recent article published in the TLS (31 May 1974), Dennis Welland makes the following comment on his first meeting with Sassoon: 'The extent to which, after more than thirty years, Sassoon was still a prisoner of war was as unmistakable as it was saddening.'

It is astonishing that the author of 'Insensibility', 'Futility', 'Greater Love' and 'Strange Meeting' should have started his poetic career by writing undistinguished—and one might say, unpromising—juvenilia. Owen began writing poetry in the tradition of the Romantics, with Keats and Shelley as his idols. While a sonnet entitled 'Written in a Wood, September 1910' is full of Keatsian echoes, the poem, 'On Seeing a Lock of Keats's Hair' frankly indicates the young poet's ardent and worshipful attitude towards Keats. C. Day Lewis has noted that Owen grew up as 'a youth oppressed by the vague dissatisfaction and disillusionment, the morbid negativism of adolescence'.<sup>45</sup> And most of his early poems are the result of adolescent brooding, and a pseudo-Romantic conception of poetry. Even in his later poems he was not able to entirely free himself from such romanticisms. For instance, in a Shelleyan sonnet 'Storm', he is fascinated by the enormous energy and beauty of the storm. Just as Shelley wants to identify himself with the west-wind, Owen wishes to borrow the terrible energy of the storm, with which he proposes to redeem the world:

The land shall freshen that was under gloom;  
 What matter if all men cry aloud and start,  
 And women hide bleak faces in their shawl,  
 At those hilarious thunders of my fall?

Here the poet is carried away by the power and strength of the storm, but fails to indicate, within the poem, how the destructive power can be utilised for constructive purposes. In Shelley's poem, the fierce west-wind is seen as a source of regeneration because it heralds spring, and as a vehicle of the poet's 'dead thoughts'. In contrast, Owen's line 'The land shall freshen that was under gloom' remains a mere rhetorical assertion, backed up by neither a positive image, nor a consistent thought-pattern.

'Storm' is a later poem (October 1916), and it shows that in the absence of a concrete poetic subject (which turned out to be, for him, the bestiality of war) Owen did not have the Romantic poet's capacity to invest an abstract theme with the strength and power of an imaginative mind. It is Owen's lack of imaginative ability, which his model Keats had so rapidly acquired, that can account for the weaknesses in even his finest war poems too. In fact, he did not seem to have fully appreciated how poetic imagination was used by the 'better Romantic poets. For, when he was faced with harsh reality, he felt

that 'poetry' had not done justice to it. He spoke of:

...the universal pervasion of *Ugliness*. Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language... everything unnatural, broken, blasted: the distortion of the dead, whose unburied bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them most glorious.<sup>46</sup>

The conventionally patriotic poets had not called such sights 'glorious' so much as just ignored whatever seemed to them unpleasant. But Keats knew that a poet must not only recognise the tragedy and suffering but also should have the imaginative ability to perceive the principle of beauty and truth operating there. Commenting on a painting called 'Death On The Pale Horse', Keats remarked:

The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth. Examine 'King Lear', and you will find this exemplified throughout but in this picture we have unpleasantness without any momentous depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its repulsiveness.<sup>47</sup>

Equipped with such a 'Romantic' concept of poetry, Owen might have written better poetry, but, lacking it, his pseudo-romanticism frequently interfered with his direct, honest poetic utterances. The charm of romantic imagery had such a powerful hold on him that even when, in the war years, he came to repudiate the yearnings and pursuits of his early poems, he did so in poems which can only be described as bad romantic poetry:

I slew all falser love: I slew all true,  
That I might nothing love but your truth, Boy—

This is how he starts his poem 'To Eros', and he goes on to point out how he has come to disillusionment:

But when I fell upon your sandalled feet,  
You laughed; you loosed away my lips: you rose.  
I heard the singing of your wings' retreat;  
Far flown, I watched you flush the Olympian snows,



Beyond my hoping. Starkly I returned  
To stare upon the ash of all I burned.

Here the use of cliché imagery (e.g., 'sandalled feet', 'wings' retreat' and 'Olympian snows') would seem to deny what the poem seeks to affirm. 'Music' is a similar poem in which the need to deal with 'humanity' with depth and seriousness is felt, in contrast to his early romantic escapades:

I have been gay with trivial fifes that laugh;  
And songs more sweet than possible things are sweet;  
And gongs, and oboes. Yet I guessed not half  
Life's symphony till I had made hearts beat,  
And touched Love's body into trembling cries,  
And blown my love's lips into laughs and sighs.

C. Day Lewis has very apt comments to make on this poem, which Owen had begun writing in 1916 and did not complete until October 1917: 'The poem is an interesting example of Owen's occasional regression, even at this later date, into his lush way of writing. The last two lines are obviously influenced by Keats.'<sup>48</sup>

The war provided Owen with subject-matter which turned the romantic-elegiac strain of his early poems into the deep feelings of sorrow and compassion which characterise his later poetry. Keats's rapid development in the last year or so of his life can perhaps be explained in terms of his astonishing imaginative and emotional growth, but Owen's development—his *annus mirabilis* was the period between August 1917 and September 1918, when he produced his finest works—can be clearly linked with his experiences in the trenches, which proved so significant for his poetic personality. For one thing, these experiences enabled him to see and realise human suffering, which he had been vaguely contemplating without much imaginative power in his earlier poems. In other words, war provided him with the subject-matter on which his poetic sensibilities could work. So important was war for Owen's poetry that Anthony Thwaite has been tempted to speculate that Owen 'would simply have stopped writing, once the war was over'.<sup>49</sup> Yet during the earlier stages of the war he himself little realised that it was to prove to be such a blessing to him in this sense. In fact, in a sonnet written on 23 March, 1917, he pathetically abandons all aspirations for poetic fame. He does not

hope that the gravers will 'score' his inscription with 'florid screed', apparently in the Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey:

Let my inscription be this soldier's disc....

Wear it sweet friend. Inscribe no date nor deed.

But may thy heart-beat kiss it night and day

Until the name grow blurred and fade away.

('To My Friend')

When war broke out, Owen was in France. He saw it as an instrument of terrible destruction and expressed his feelings in a sonnet entitled '1914'. Since he was not in England, he was unaffected by the general spirit of enthusiasm and release in the initial months of the war. Sitting in his quiet, provincial French town, he saw war as a menace which threatened the peace and the progress of the world:

War broke: and now the winter of the world

With perishing darkness closes in.

The foul tornado, centred in Berlin,

Is over all the width of Europe whirled,

Rending the sails of progress. Rent or furled

Are all Art's ensigns. Verse wails. Now begin

Famine of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin.

The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled.

In the sestet, he traced the course of human civilisation through Spring, Summer and Autumn, and viewed the present in terms of Winter. War obviously symbolised for him the tragedy and the end of twentieth-century civilisation. The sonnet remains impressive as indicative of the poet's breadth of vision and his recognition of the wider implications of war, though it cannot be denied that it sounds generalised and rhetorical, lacking the bite and immediacy of personally-felt emotions.

But he lost this sense of perspective and breadth of vision once he entered the war. From then on he began to grasp the 'reality' as it unfolded itself to him as a combat soldier. His poetry is a record of that revelation. He joined the Artists' Rifles in the summer of 1915, and spent the next sixteen months in infantry training. Early in January 1917, he was assigned to the Second Battalion of the Manchester Regiment, then on the Somme front. Just before leaving

for the front, he expressed enthusiasm and excitement in a letter to his mother:

It is a huge satisfaction to be among well-trained troops and genuine 'real old' officers . . . This morning I was hit! We were bombing, and a fragment from somewhere hit my thumb knuckle. I coaxed out one drop of blood. Alas! no more!! There is a fine heroic feeling about being in France, and I am in perfect spirits.<sup>50</sup>

But he was soon disillusioned. In his letter dated 4 February of the same year, which has been quoted earlier, he spoke of the hideous landscape and the 'universal pervasion of ugliness'. He spent the severe winter of 1917 in the trenches and personally saw and experienced the horrors of warfare. In May he was sent to hospital for treatment of neurasthenia. He was later transferred to England. After a brief stay at Welsh Hospital, Netley (Hampshire), he arrived in late June at Craiglockhart Hospital.

It was during this time of medical treatment that Owen formulated his own views about war which inspired his best poetry. To start with, he felt a sense of brotherhood and fellowship with his fellow soldiers, and a feeling of indignation against the smug civilians who protracted the war. He said: 'I wish the Boche would have the pluck to come right in and make a clean sweep of the pleasure boats, and the promenaders on the Spa, and all the stinking Leeds and Bradford war-profiteers now reading *John Bull* on Scarborough sands'.<sup>51</sup> His religious ideas and ideals underwent a profound change, and he discovered that the central message of Christianity was 'passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed: but do not kill.'<sup>52</sup> At Craiglockhart, Owen met Sassoon who had already become well-known for his anti-war poems. The influence of this meeting on Owen's poetry has been vastly exaggerated: Sassoon<sup>53</sup> himself has set the record right by pointing out that Owen had already discovered his poetic destiny before their meeting. Indeed, Owen's letters to his relatives at home—during the period of the Somme Offensive—show how he was describing in relentless detail the horrors of trench-scenes. However, there is no denying the fact that Sassoon's own poetic practices, and Barbusse's *Le Feu* (which Sassoon had lent to him) influenced some of Owen's poems, which are chiefly realistic and satirical. In 'Dulce Et Decorum Est', he builds up a series of horrible images,

taken directly from the battle-field, only to prove the 'old lie' of the Horatian motto. The contrast between the imagery and the motto has been presented powerfully enough, but as a piece of poetry it is vigorously descriptive rather than poetically evocative because the poet relies more on 'reportage' than imaginative recreation. It doubtlessly records his anger and indignation, but judged as poetry it is hardly more than rhetorical versification of what he tried to do by sending pictures, sketches and description of soldiers' wounds and mutilations in his letters home. His other poems like 'S.I.W.' and 'Mental Cases' are starkly realistic in a similar vein, whereas 'The Chances' and 'The Dead-Beat' are Sassoon-like in their sardonic irony.

Perhaps the most interesting poem of this period is 'Exposure'. It is dated, according to Edmund Blunden, February 1917\* in which case it must be one of Owen's first poems after he went to the front. In the first place, as J. Louiseau<sup>54</sup> has noted, there is a similarity between the opening lines of this poem and those of Keats's *Nightingale Ode*. Keats's poem opens with the words:—

My heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense . . . .

and a trance-like atmosphere is created. In the like manner, 'Exposure' begins:

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife  
us . . . .  
Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent . . . .

The context, of course, has changed. Instead of Keats listening to the bird singing with 'full throated ease' on his lawn in Hampstead, we see Owen and his soldiers lying in the trenches in winter cold, exposed to the 'gunnery rumbles'. As the poem proceeds, the poet tries to get reconciled to the suffering on the ground that it is some kind of penitential sacrifice. He hopes that man would be redeemed by learning to love God anew. Such pious yearnings are conveyed

\*See the TLS of 21 December 1973 and of subsequent weeks for recent views about this dating.

through lines that make a clever use of Keatsian adjectives, and his own innovation, half-rhymes:

Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed  
With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;  
For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;  
Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed—  
We turn back to our dying.

Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;  
Nor ever suns smile true on child, field or fruit.  
For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;  
Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,  
For love of God seems dying.

There is a clear note of scepticism: lines like 'We turn back to our dying' and 'But nothing happens' indicate the apparent futility of suffering. Nevertheless, Owen makes a brave attempt to find meaning in the war-effort. He tries to accept the evils of war in terms of Christian sacrifice. Although his doubts about the validity of this position increased as he advanced through the war, and he came to reject it altogether later on, 'Exposure' remains interesting as a transitional poem in which Keatsian influence is markedly present in imagery and diction, and war is treated in terms of evocative contrasts.

The juxtaposition of life at two levels is perhaps done with most remarkable results in 'Spring Offensive'. The soldiers, going to the battlefields, realise that they have 'come to the end of the world', and just before the offensive they fondly think of the beautiful and familiar aspects of nature. Owen renders this with rich Keatsian sensuousness:

Marvelling they stood, and watched the long grass swirled  
By the May breeze, murmurous with wasp and midge,  
For though the summer oozed into their veins  
Like an injected drug for their bodies' pains....

But as soon as they enter the battlefield, the whole landscape changes:

And instantly the whole sky burned  
With fury against them; earth set sudden cups

In thousands for their blood; and the green slope  
Chasmed and steepened sheer to infinite space.

Here nature evidently symbolises the ordered world from which the soldiers are thrown into an unnatural predicament. The idea is vividly conveyed through a dexterous manipulation of imagery. The 'warm fields' and the buttercup 'blessed with gold' are symbolical of the happy aspects of life, and as the soldiers depart from this life, even the little brambles cling to them 'like sorrowing hands'. The imagery of the battle-field changes: the sky burns 'with fury', the golden buttercup turn into cups thirsting for blood, and the green slope is 'Chasmed'. Equally significant is the final line with its rhetorical interrogation, 'Why speak not they of comrades that went under?' Welland provides the answer: 'The survivors, having besmirched "blood over their souls", can no longer see their world as it was: the buttercups have become receptacles for blood, not givers of benison.'<sup>55</sup> While this answer is only implicit in 'Spring Offensive', it looms large in the subsequent poems of Owen. In the last year of the war, and of his own life, he was almost completely obsessed by the horrors of war, so that he was not able to see any positive alternative for the soldiers who were doomed to meaningless suffering. He could not imagine that the war might also have been viewed as a challenge, a test of manhood and of human endurance.

The ready answer to such charges can be that the terrible nature of the war precluded any such positives. In that case, Owen's poetry would be reduced to a presentation of only what he saw and felt. That is what fundamentally, and deliberately, it was. For Owen, poetry was basically self-expression and, as Stephen Spender has remarked, when Eliot advanced the view that the progress of an artist was continual self-sacrifice, 'a continual extinction of personality', he (Eliot) was 'opposing the kind of self-expression found in the poetry of Rupert Brooke, and upon which Owen's poetry is dependent'.<sup>56</sup> It is no wonder then that his personal experience almost entirely controlled, and limited the nature of, his poetry. In a letter which he wrote on his first return from the front, he made the significant remark that the war showed him a different kind of 'reality':

The other day I read a biography of Tennyson, which says he was unhappy even in the midst of fame, wealth and domestic serenity. Divine discontent! I can quite believe he never knew happiness for

one moment such as I have—for one or two moments. But as for suffering, was he ever frozen alive, with dead men for comforters? Did he hear moaning at the Bar, not at twilight and the evening bell only, but at dawn, noon and night, eating and sleeping, walking and working, always the close moaning of the Bar, the thunder, the hissing, and the whining of the Bar?—Tennyson, it seems, was a great child. So should I have been but for Beaumont Hamel.<sup>57</sup>

Obviously, Owen was incapable of imaginative suffering. That is to say, he could not grasp suffering in its intensity and depth until it happened to him personally. The 'melancholy' of his pre-war poems, therefore, was no more than, to borrow his own words from 'Insensibility', 'poet's tearful fooling'. This experientially oriented attitude led Owen to attach too great an importance to subject-matter as such in poetry. In a letter, dated 15 August 1917, he spoke of Sassoon's 'trench life sketches', and went on to remark: 'Shakespeare reads vapid after these. Not of course because Sassoon is a greater artist, but because of the subjects, I mean.'<sup>58</sup> This dichotomy that he seemed to find between the subject-matter and the artistry in poetry underlined the very weakness of his own conception of 'war poetry'. He defined the new role of the poet in the midst of war (in his famous 'Preface') in a way which suggests that he saw poetry as propaganda.<sup>59</sup>

His poem 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo', written in November 1917, sets out the poetic standards that he has discovered through his own war experiences. He believes that it is his duty to convey to his readers the truth that he himself has learnt,—the truth of war. He feels the same emotions that poets in the past have felt, but the sources of *his* emotions are different:

I, too, saw God through mud,  
The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled.  
War brought more glory to their eyes than blood,  
And gave their laughs more glee than shakes a child . . .

And witnessed exultation,  
Faces that used to curse me, scowl for scowl,  
Shine and lift up with passion of oblation,  
Seraphic for an hour; though they were foul.

Owen is doing here (though with greater skill and power) what he had tried to do earlier, namely, to expose the false assumptions of civilians at home. Or, at any rate, to show how the old values are

non-existent or totally transformed in the context of war. The poem's underlying irony, which is reinforced by a clever use of romantic imagery for descriptions of battle-scenes, persons and events, attempts to emphasise the romantic nature of civilian conceptions and values. When God is seen 'through mud', or the glory of war is discovered in war's bloodshed and slaughter, the implication is that neither God nor the glory of war actually exists, and the same is true of laughter, exultation, fellowship and beauty. What is true, and what does exist, is the tragedy of war, and the poet wants the reader to enter this reality of experience. In other words, it is only the suffering soldier (rather, soldier-poet) who can lead the civilian into an area of experience, which embraces the all-important truth that he 'needs to know'.

John Lehmann reminds us that 'it is important for us not to forget that "achievement in poetry" no longer had any meaning for him (Owen) beside the sacred duty he felt to become the voice through which the agonies and wrongs of the men who were dying around him should be made known to the world. We should mistake Wilfred Owen as a human being if we did. . .'<sup>60</sup> While no one will deny that Owen very effectively 'made known to the world' the sufferings of soldiers, and that he was a noble human being with feelings of deep compassion, it is the limitations of his 'achievement in poetry' that must be recognised now.

It is ironical that an Imperialist like Sir Henry Newbolt should have been among the first to pinpoint the characteristic weakness in Owen's attitude to poetry and war. In a letter written in 1924, but not published until 1942, he remarked:

(Sassoon) had sent me Wilfred Owen's Poems, with an Introduction by himself. The best of them I knew already—they are terribly good, but of course limited, almost all on one note. . . . There are more than two sides to this business of war, and a man is hardly normal any longer if he comes down to one. Owen and the rest of the broken men rail at the old men who sent the young to die: they have suffered cruelly, but in the nerves and not the heart—they haven't the experience or the imagination to know the extreme human agony—'Who giveth me to die for thee, Absalom my son, my son' . . . there is nothing fundamental or final about them—at least they only put one figure into a very big equation, and that's not one of the unknown but one of the best known quantities.<sup>61</sup>



Newbolt's charge that Owen wrote 'almost all on one note' and that he had 'suffered cruelly, but in the nerves and not the heart' is perceptive criticism. Stephen Spender complained in 1935 that Owen's poetry dwelt on one single emotion of 'passive grief'.<sup>62</sup> Next year, Yeats excluded Owen from the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* on the ground that 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry'; more specifically he dismissed Owen, in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, as 'a sandwich-board Man of revolution. . . . He is all blood, dirt and sucked-sugar-stick. There is every excuse for him but none for those who like him.'<sup>63</sup> It is perhaps true that in making these remarks about Owen, Yeats was partly roused by his dislike of the upcoming poets of the thirties, one of whom, C. Day Lewis, had recently in *A Hope for Poetry* (1934) held Owen up as one of their poetic 'ancestors'. But it is also being generally recognised that considered as dispassionate critical remarks they are quite valid. After all, as a critical axiom, Yeats was not propounding anything new. As he himself mentioned, Matthew Arnold had dropped 'Empedocles on Etna' from the canon of his poetry because it portrayed passive suffering. As for Yeats's impatience with the 'blood, dirt', etc., in Owen's poetry, it was simply the result of his believing, like Keats, that the intensity of artistic vision burnt out the unpleasant details and seized the significant emotion in a given situation.

Critics of Yeats on this matter tend to imply that he did not have any patience with poetry that did not come up to his standard of 'tragic joy', as if the Yeatsian concept was an eccentric one. Yet, all great tragic artists have, in one way or another, tried to conform to this ideal, and the suspicion is that those who have not, are in some ways deficient. Owen clearly falls in the second category, and his weakness lies in his inability to grasp imaginatively the essential nature of the tragedy that *overwhelmed* him. He was content to recreate the tragedy without being able to interpret it in larger human terms. While he eminently succeeded in conveying the 'truth' of the war, he was not able to relate it to the truth about the vast mysteries of human life as such.

As a result of this poetic attitude, his poetry, *as a whole*, strikes one as morbid, monotonous and too painful without tragic relief or exaltation. There are a few poems, though, in which the antithesis between the civilian and the soldier breaks down, and the tragic vision is projected on a wider, universal scale. 'Insensibility' rises above mere satire into a plea for greater sensitiveness to, and a sympathetic

understanding of, human suffering. As contrasted with Sassoon's condemnations of 'authority', Owen here universalises the picture by addressing *all* insensitive beings. The tragedy that the poem evokes is cosmic, and it engulfs everybody:

He sings along the march  
Which we march taciturn, because of dusk,  
The long, forlorn, relentless trend  
From larger day to huger nights.

This poem laments not only the insensitivity to the plight of 'the cannon fodder' but also a general callousness (on the part of the less sensitive fighting soldiers too) towards the sad experiences of human life, which moves inexorably towards 'the last sea and the hapless stars':

By choice they made themselves immune  
To pity and whatever mourns in man  
Before the last sea and the hapless stars;  
Whatever mourns when many leave these shores;  
Whatever shares  
The eternal reciprocity of tears.

Owen treats the elemental theme of human tragedy most powerfully in 'Futility':

Move him into the sun—  
Gently its touch awoke him once,  
At home, whispering of fields unsown.  
Always it woke him, even in France,  
Until this morning and this snow.  
If anything might rouse him now  
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds,—  
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.  
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,  
Full-nerved—still warm—too hard to stir?  
Was it for this the clay grew tall?  
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil  
To break earth's sleep at all?

In these lines of grand simplicity, the very rhythm evokes a sense of solemn dignity. The course of human evolution has been charted in order to pose the unanswerable questions of the last lines. Here we encounter no protestations or railings, but are confronted with the mysterious ways of nature. The B.M. manuscripts of the poem show how Owen removed all topical references, especially to the war—e.g., for ‘Are limbs bled with a little swords’, we have the more general, ‘Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides’ Though, in the context of the poet’s biography, it is natural to think of the man in the poem as a war casualty, it is quite possible to see the poem as independent of war associations. The poet regards the sun as the source of human warmth and vitality, and as the power that enables the ‘clay’ to grow ‘tall’. But if the natural process encourages human evolution, it also completes the cycle by bringing in the end. The title of the poem, as well as its last lines emphasise the futility of all this, but not entirely without a glimpse of grandeur as embodied in the magnificent line, ‘Was it for this the clay grew tall?’. It is true that this poem does not celebrate ‘tragic joy’ in the manner of Yeats’s ‘Lapis Lazuli’, yet it is a moving poem about the paradoxes of the human condition.

Such pity which arises out of man’s elemental confrontation with nature is still impressive, despite Owen’s sense of helplessness before the mysterious ways of life. But, when the mainspring of his poetry is the kind of pity which is felt for the suffering of soldiers, caused by ignorant and greedy human and political institutions, the poetic performance is less spectacular. For one thing, such an attitude reduces human beings to the level of puny, impotent creatures, who do not possess even the potentiality to alter the ‘human institutions’ which have been oppressing them so relentlessly. In ‘The Show’, all the imaginative abilities of the poet are deployed to recreate a war-blasted landscape:

My soul looked down from a vague height, with Death,  
As unremembering how I rose or why,  
And saw a sad land, weak with sweats of dearth,  
Gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,  
And pitted with great pocks and scabs of plague.

Men have turned into loathsome caterpillars, and Owen introduces a further set of hideous imagery to represent their agony and writhing:

I saw their bitten backs curve, loop, and straighten,  
I watched those agonies curl, lift, and flatten.

Departing from his practice of evoking contrasting pictures of civilian and military landscapes, Owen here strains his tortuous imagination, which seems to feed on masochistic intensity.

Harold Owen's description of the poet's personality shows that there was a streak of masochism in him right from the very beginning. Then there was his slightly abnormal fondness for his mother, resulting in enmity towards his father. Harold Owen remarks.

... out of his love for all of us, my father did make efforts to try and draw confidence and understanding out of Wilfred. But so strongly was it fixed in Wilfred's mind that my father was alien to him and thwarting to all that he was seeking for, that he, in turn, could only meet any advance from him with infuriating nonchalance and a scornful often ill-disguised assumption that no suggestion originating from him could be of real value.<sup>64</sup>

It is not surprising then that, in one poem, Abram's preparedness to obey God to the extent of sacrificing his own son at His command, is distorted, and Abram is seen as a deliberate murderer:

Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.  
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,  
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.  
(*'The Parable of the Old Man and The Young'*)

Elsewhere (e.g., in 'S.I.W.', 'A Terre', 'Smile, Smile, Smile') fathers are almost invariably identified with the wicked. They deliberately bring about destruction for the young men, who die helplessly and passively. The poem 'Miners' puts soldiers in the same category as miners: both die so that:

The centuries will burn rich loads  
With which we groaned,  
Whose warmth shall lull their dreaming lids  
While songs are crooned.  
But they will not dream of us poor lads  
Lost in the ground.

Stephen Spender has some acute remarks to make on this poem:

Beautiful as these lines are, one sees that the poet is conjuring up an emotion of pity in order to achieve them: he is not writing because he believes that the lives of men who dig coal and die in wars could in any way be altered, or, on the other hand, are in any way justified. His one emotion is a passive grief for the men and boys. The difficulty is that poetry inspired by pity is dependent on that repeated stimulus for its inspiration.<sup>65</sup>

This rather negative attitude is at the core of another brilliantly executed poem, 'Greater Love', in which the dying soldiers come to a realisation not only of the inadequacies of sexual love but also of the terrible demands made by the Christian concept of 'greater love'. Many critics have commented on the various levels on which the poem works. The basic contrast is, of course, between sexual love and the 'greater love' of the men in the trenches. Each object of physical love (e.g., lips, looks, limbs) is, brought into sharp contrast to its counterpart in the battlefield:

Red lips are not so red  
 As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.  
 Kindness of wooed and wooer  
 Seems shame to their love pure.  
 O Love, your eyes lose lure  
 When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!

The images of the next couple of stanzas go on to confirm strongly the initial impression that he is ashamed of sexual love, as compared to the love and comradeship among men: 'Kindness of wooed and wooer/ Seems shame to their love pure'. One begins to have slight misgivings at this point when one remembers that, in a letter to his mother, Owen had said, 'All women, without exception, *annoy* me' (Owen's italics). Owen seeks to deny the value of sexual love by introducing lines of great lyrical beauty only to bring them to an abrupt halt by the last long, flat line, carrying the image of piteous coughing mouths:

Your voice sings not so soft—  
 Though even as wind murmuring through rafters loft—  
 Your dear voice is not dear,  
 Gentle and evening clear,

As theirs whom none now hear,  
Now earth has stopped their piteous mouths that coughed.

After having presented the suffering of the soldiers in sharp contrast to the supposed pleasures of sexual love, Owen seeks to sublimate their emotions in the last stanza by equating the agonies of the soldiers with the Passion of Christ. It may be recalled that early in 1917 he had learnt that 'one of Christ's essential commands was, Passivity at any price!' and as the months rolled by, he came to draw a resemblance between the passive suffering of soldiers and that of Christ. In a letter, dated 4 July 1918, Owen wrote to Osbert Sitwell:

For 14 hours yesterday I was at work—teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not imagine he thirst till after the last halt. I attended his supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected his feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb, and stands at attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him everyday, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha.<sup>67</sup>

It is this 'Christ-soldier' who appears in the final stanza of the poem under discussion:

And though your hands be pale,  
Paler are all which trail  
Your cross through flame and hail:  
Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not.

But whereas Christ's suffering and death redeemed mankind, those of the soldiers are totally meaningless. The poem consists of a series of rejections of the values that men ordinarily cherish. Hence, the attempt to see the sufferings of the soldiers in terms of Christ's sacrifice seems an ironic reproach, an impression that is reinforced by the irony implicit in the title of the poem, and its sardonic last line.

The idea of the futility of the soldiers' 'sacrifice' is the theme of 'Strange Meeting'. Here again, the Christ-figure appears:

Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared  
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,  
Lifting distressful eyes as if to bless.

But it is 'Hell' where the encounter takes place:

And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,  
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

The enemy (Owen's earlier line was, 'I was a German conscript, and your friend') and the poet are bound by the larger bonds of humanity. The poet is informed by him that he had the 'courage' and the 'wisdom' not to participate actively in the war, into which he had been conscripted. He himself was disinclined to fight ('My hands were loath and cold') but the poet 'jabbed and killed' him. As a result, he could not convey to the warring peoples the 'truth' that he had learnt:

I mean the truth untold,  
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

In the absence of this profound recognition of the 'truth' of war, greater destruction and calamity await mankind in the years to come:

Now men will go content with what that we spoiled,  
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.  
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.  
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.

And the fear of this, as Owen said in the 'Preface', was the motivating impulse behind his war poetry. He went on to add, 'All a poet can do today is warn'. The world did not pay any heed to his advice, and tumbled into the holocaust of another devastating war. Judged as propaganda, Owen's poetry has proved to be ineffective as all propaganda is, in the long run. What we are left with is the 'poetry' of his poems. Since they do not have, within them, seeds of change expressed in purely human terms, they are, in the final analysis, a mere accumulation of horrors. The feeling of pity degenerates into a sense of pathos when the tragic spectacle, out of which it arises, is one of unrelieved gloom. Unfortunately, Owen's profound capacity to feel 'pity' increased his *need* for objects of such pity. This was one reason why he wanted to go back to the front, after he had recovered from his injuries:

It was not despair, or terror, it was more terrible than terror, for it was a blindfold look, and without expression, like a dead rabbit's. It will never be painted, and no actor will ever seize it. And to describe it, I think I must go back and be with them.<sup>63</sup>

And Sassoon had told him that 'it would be a good thing for my poetry if I went back'.<sup>69</sup> It is not surprising, then, that Owen gives the impression of nursing an anguished sensibility that throve on poignancy.

Any dispassionate critical evaluation of Owen's poetry is likely to suggest that Owen's problem bears resemblance to that of Shakespeare in *Hamlet*: in both cases the artist's overwhelming emotion exceeded the object that inspired it. Eliot had felt that the phenomenon was difficult to explain because of the absence of relevant biographical details about Shakespeare. One of Owen's critics, armed with such documentation, seeks to explain it in terms of Owen's homosexual tendencies. Taking the clue from Robert Graves's remark, made in 1929, that Owen was 'an idealistic homosexual', Joseph Cohen<sup>70</sup> has written a longish article, in which he convincingly demonstrates 'that a form of homosexuality dominated Wilfred's sexual nature and that its presence can be confirmed. I submit that it is the final key to understanding Owen's achievement, and that the position he took towards the war was almost entirely motivated by homosexual elements.' By quoting extensively from Owen's letters and poems, Cohen shows how Owen's love for his mother resulted in a hatred of his father, and a rejection of women. Moreover:

Owen's extension of patriarchal blood-lust did not end, however, with the Home Front. There is a special antipathy reserved for God, the ultimate Father-figure, as opposed to Owen's thorough-going love for Jesus. . . . Owen's animosity is so strong he can serve it only by creating a powerful clash of interest between Jesus and God, a clash hardly supported by Christian theology. It is understandable only in the light of Owen's attitude towards his own father and his transference of affection to Jesus, i.e., one who is young and suffering and passively subjected, as Owen felt he was, to an overwhelming authority.

The 'injustice-collector' in Owen—a typical homosexual trait—can be seen in most of Owen's war poems, which dwell on depression and defeatism, privation and passivity.



All such details do not detract, as Cohen is the first to point out, from Owen's contribution to English literature, 'which is safe'. But they certainly help us to understand better the possible causes, and the extent, of the limitations from which both his concept of poetic functions and his poetry suffered. Owen has presented the horrors of war graphically and movingly as no other English poet has ever done. The value of his poetry as 'a social document' is undeniable, but obviously he could have done better as a poet if he had accepted Robert Graves's advice given to him in 1917. 'For God's sake cheer up and write more optimistically—The war's not ended yet but a poet should have a spirit above wars.'<sup>71</sup>

Isaac Rosenberg was almost alone among the poets of the First World War who seems to have realised that 'a poet should have a spirit above wars'. But since the tendency has been to judge this poetry in propagandistic, rather than literary, terms the result has been that a remarkable poet like Rosenberg has not received half the critical attention and acclaim that have been the share of his more fortunate contemporaries.\* Speaking of Owen and Rosenberg, D.S.R. Welland observed that both were 'equally devoted, but to different things; Rosenberg, who was also a painter, to an aesthetic ideal, Owen to a social one',<sup>72</sup> the implication being that Owen was more successful as a war poet because of his social ideal. But surely in the case of a good artist the aesthetic and social ideals are inseparable. Eliot made this point in his well-known essay on Yeats when he remarked that 'an artist, by serving his art with entire integrity, is at the same time rendering the greatest service to his nation and the world'. Rosenberg himself would have readily agreed with Eliot on this point. He had a sound critical mind, and he made some penetrating observations on the nature of art and literature. It would be interesting to quote a few of his remarks. In his essay 'Art' (1914), he wrote that 'a great genius is, at once, the product and the creator of his age. It is in him that a marked stage of evolution is expressed'—this view anticipates the idea that I.A. Richards was to propound later on in his *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) that the poet is 'the point at which the growth of the mind shows itself'. Rosenberg went on to say that an artist does more than simply reflect the life of his times.

\*Recently, however, in *Out of Battle* (1972), Jon Silkin devotes considerable space to Rosenberg. But he seems to see Rosenberg's achievement in quite a different light.

...art is an intensification and simplification of life, which is fragmentary and has no order and no coherent relationship to us, until it has passed the crucible of Art. [Cf. Richards's 'His (the artist's) work is the ordering of what in most minds is disordered'.] Science explains nature physically by atoms, philosophy explains life morally but art intensifies life, representing a portion through the laws of unity that govern the whole.<sup>73</sup>

Moreover, he anticipated the practices of poets like Eliot and Yeats when he recognised that an artist strives to achieve a unified vision beyond mere personal impressions:

We must not look at nature with the self-conscious mannered eye of a stylist, whose vision is limited by his own personal outlook, but assimilate the multifarious and widened vision, which simply means a total sinking of all conscious personality, a complete absorption and forgetfulness in nature, to bring out one's personality.<sup>74</sup>

It is more interesting to note that Rosenberg makes use of such critical ideas for writing his poetry. More than any other poet of the First World War (with the possible exception of Brooke and Edward Thomas) Rosenberg not only had a catholic taste in literature but was also fairly well-read in English poetry. He started with an enthusiasm for Yeats and Shelley and a passion for Shakespeare's sonnets. He had his Donne period (he carried Donne's poems with him to war) and among the Victorians he admired Rossetti and Swinburne. Among his contemporary favourites were Francis Thomson and Georgians like Abercrombie and Bottomley. At a time when he was desperately trying to get published he willingly allowed Marsh to include him in *Georgian Poetry* though he had very little affinity with the Georgian ideals of poetry. He had met Hulme and was certainly attracted by the latter's ideas as well as those of Pound, who was instrumental in the publication of Rosenberg's poems ('Break of Day in the Trenches' and 'Marching') in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry Magazine*. And it is reasonable to suppose that the precision of his imagery and his linguistic compactness owe something to the Imagistic techniques. The other contemporary poetic trend to which Rosenberg was exposed was that set by the Symbolist poets. He had read Poe and Verlaine, and particularly liked R. S. Flint's 'The Heart's Hunger' because it expressed that 'strange longing for an indefinite

ideal; the haunting desire for that which is beyond the reach of hands'.<sup>75</sup> It is not surprising that with such a literary background Rosenberg should have seen his role as a poet in war differently. Instead of letting the war dictate his poetry he had already decided how it was going to affect his poetry:

I am determined that this war, with all its powers of devastation, shall not master my poeting; that is, if I am lucky enough to come through all right. I will not leave a corner of my consciousness covered up, but saturate myself with the strange and extraordinary new conditions of this life, and it will all refine itself into poetry later on.<sup>76</sup>

He did not approve of much of the war poetry that was being written at that time because it was mainly concerned with romantic glorification of war and conventional feelings and ideas. He pleaded for artistic impersonality and detachment that might lead to concentration in one 'distinguished emotion' which the poet should aim at:

The poems by the soldier are vigorous but, I feel, a bit commonplace. I did not like Rupert Brooke's begloried sonnets for the same reason. What I mean is second hand phrases 'lambent fires', etc., takes (*sic*) from its reality and strength. It should be approached in a colder way, more abstract, with less of the million feelings everybody feels; or these should be concentrated in one distinguished emotion.<sup>77</sup>

A few facts about his distinctive personality and poor upbringing, in addition to his recognition of the vigorous demands of art, can help us to see how Rosenberg came to a new understanding of the relationship between the poet and war. Joseph Leftwich<sup>78</sup> wrote an article in 1936 in which he left an authentic account of Rosenberg's early struggles. Leftwich described how he, and two other boys, Winsten and Rodker (both of whom became successful writers later on), still in their teens, Jewish, living in the East End of London, and having literary and artistic ambitions, had formed themselves into a 'group', and met one another (at Toynbee Hall, Whitechapel Library, and Whitechapel Art Gallery) to discuss subjects of mutual interest. Rosenberg joined this 'group' and was glad to have found some friends with whom he could discuss his poems and paintings. He was a boy

of indifferent health and his 'home life was', in the words of Leftwich,

like that of most of us. We lived in dingy houses, in drab streets. His family was poor. His 'studio' was in the back kitchen, a small, stuffy, crowded room at the end of a long narrow passage, which was the family living room. The dresser, crammed with crockery, occupied most of the space; the table, at the corner of which Rosenberg sat sketching, was rickety and littered with cups and plates.

He was educated at the elementary schools of Stepney until he was fourteen, when he became an apprentice engraver for Carl Hentschel, an art publisher in Fleet Street. He attended art classes at Birkbeck College and later on joined, through the courtesy of three Jewish ladies, the Slade School. He published, at his expense, three private pamphlets of poems which won him hardly any money or recognition. He did get to know a few well-known literary figures of the day (e.g., Marsh, Monro, Binyon, Bottomley) but they were, as Leftwich noted, condescending in their attitude towards this 'poor ungainly Jew... writing good poetry'. None of these people gave Rosenberg any concrete help that might have enabled him to gain a foothold in the contemporary poetic scene. In fact, so gloomy were his prospects that, at one stage, he had contemplated emigrating to America on a 'cattle ship' for better opportunities. However, he gave up the idea and went to South Africa instead to visit his married sister and a brother there. Though he had expected that the South African climate would improve his health, he did not like living there primarily because he felt cut off from cultural and literary life. Therefore, he returned to England in May 1915 and, despite his ill-health, joined the Suffolk Bantam Regiment, and afterwards the 11th King's Own Rifles as Private 22311.

It seems pathetic now that he joined the army for 'sheer economic need'. Leftwich wrote that he 'was not fit for soldiering. But life became so hopeless, there seemed no chance of earning his bread, and sheer economic need drove him to join the Army.' Life in the army was particularly painful to him because he was a private (as opposed to the officer ranks of the more famous war poets) who had to undergo rigorous training and menial labour, and also because of his weak health. In a letter to Lascelles Abercrombie, he wrote: 'Believe me the army is the most detestable invention on this earth and nobody

but a private in the army knows what it is to be a slave'.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, he spent about twenty months in and around the trenches, as compared to about five months spent by Owen. Such experiences, one would imagine, must have turned him into a fiercely anti-war poet. They did, but his sense of humour helped him retain his sanity. He wrote to Marsh:

... know that I despise war and hate war, and hope that Kaiser William will have his bottom smacked—a naughty aggressive schoolboy who will have *all* the plum pudding.<sup>80</sup>

Moreover, Rosenberg was the sort of man who could enjoy, despite the physical suffering and hatred of war, the challenge and the sense of comradeship that it offered. According to Leftwich, when Rosenberg came to England on leave he 'still looked small and weak, but army life had improved him physically. He was more boisterously happy than I had ever known him before, and he was noisily indignant because he had heard that some people had been saying that he hated the Army and wanted to wangle his way out. It was not true, he clamoured. He liked the life and the boys, and we had to fight. He wasn't going to let these people go about spreading rumours that he was funking it.'

In his poetry, too, one can see that there is a feeling of strength, courage and, one might say, optimism. One of the central themes that runs through his poems is that of suffering, but his sense of suffering is balanced by a belief in the human potentiality for good. It is true that he was not always able to achieve such a balance, especially in his early poems like 'God', 'Spiritual Isolation', and 'Chagrin' which present a world of hopeless despair. But in such poems he was not able to embody the complete picture of life as he had already conceived it, for he was sufficiently impressed by the romantic view that man was a reservoir of infinite possibilities. The poem 'Expression' from his privately printed pamphlet *Youth* (1915), is an enthusiastic expression of such a faith. The poem sounds a bit rhetorical but the declamatory tone becomes acceptable because of the conviction with which the poet expresses a passionate belief that 'thought' and 'imagination' will overcome the 'smouldering wrong'. A similar faith in a positive outcome informs the poem he wrote in Cape Town in 1914, 'On Receiving the News of War':

Red fangs have torn His face  
God's blood is shed.  
He mourns from His lone place  
His children dead.

O! ancient crimson curse!  
Corrode, consume.  
Give back this universe  
Its pristine bloom.

This poem at once brings to one's mind Owen's poem, 'The Seed' which was written in France in 1914. The similarity between the two poems can be seen in both the poets' generalised treatment of the war theme, but Rosenberg's poem stands out for its superior linguistic control, economy of words and precise imagery. But more importantly, whereas Owen tends to see war from a historical perspective, Rosenberg takes a more primeval view. With a brilliant use of sensory images, he is able to visualise the elemental nature of the catastrophe, as well as the possibility of the universe regaining its 'pristine bloom' through it.

It was basically this elemental vision of his that accounted for the absence in Rosenberg's poetry of the note of protest against the authorities and the desire to 'inform' the civilians about the 'truth' of war that characterised so much of the poetry of the First World War. He tended to see suffering caused by war as part of human suffering in general which, he thought, was all-pervasive: 'Poor people are born in troubles and spend their time getting out of them. Born free, all try to get into them.'<sup>81</sup> He felt that if any one was to be blamed for this sorry state of things it was God, and in some of his poems God is held responsible for the bitter injustices of this world. But a source of strength in his poetry is the fact that the protest against God, or nature, is balanced by a faith in the individual will and the creative spirit. This was how he pictured Tamburlaine:

Tamburlaine, the towering colossus, symbolized the subjection of matter to will—the huge blind forces of nature shrink terrorized before this indomitable energy of purpose, clay for some colossal plastic shaping.<sup>82</sup>

It is this spirit that lies at the very centre of Rosenberg's finest war

poems, in which there is not only an unflinching realisation of human suffering and destruction but also an obdurate refusal to be overwhelmed by them. In a letter written before his embarkation for France, he remarked, 'one might succumb, be destroyed—but one might also (and chances are greater for it) be renewed, made larger, healthier'.<sup>83</sup>

Thus, Rosenberg's distinctive personality, artistic views, literary preferences and influences together with his hard experiences in life prepared him to see war and treat the subject in a manner that set him apart from his contemporaries. For instance, though he wrote, like so many of his fellow war poets, a few patriotic poems at the beginning, even in those poems Rosenberg's distinctive touch is unmistakable. In the poem, 'The Dead Heroes', English soldiers' sacrifice for the safety and glory of England is celebrated:

This blood is England's heart;  
By their dead hands  
It is their noble part  
That England stands.

He wrote another poem in a similar vein, and sent the first draft to his friend John Rodker, adding, 'Turn over for a patriotic gush a jingo spasm'.<sup>84</sup> He rewrote the poem making various changes and inscribed it on the Christmas card that he painted for his Division in 1917. The basic glorification of the English soldiers remains, but they are now seen in a larger role not only as the saviours of England but also as

the world's surety  
Of honour, light and sweetness, all forgot  
Since men first marred the writ of Mary's Son.

And by the time he came to write the poem 'Soldier: Twentieth Century' the whole picture had been universalised. Instead of the English soldier, we have the modern soldier who belongs to the long line of warriors that stretches back to the ancient history of western civilisation. In their chequered history, their services have been misused by cruel potentates for their evil and selfish ends, but now they are invoked to perform their real and legitimate duty, i.e., remove corruption and tyranny through their prowess and sacrifice:

Cruel men are made immortal,  
Out of your pain born.  
They have stolen the sun's power  
With their feet on your shoulders worn.

Let them shrink from your girth,  
That has outgrown pallid days,  
When you slept like Circe's swine,  
Or a word in the brain's ways.

Thus even in his patriotic poems Rosenberg's voice and technique are individual. His phrases and images are vivid, and the lines carry the heat and the power that the poem seeks to evoke. Also, instead of indulging in mindless patriotism he touches on one of his main themes, namely that war's sacrifices would cleanse people and purge the corrupt society. (Of course, Brooke's sonnet 'Peace' is also concerned with a similar theme but in contrast to Rosenberg's sophistication and seriousness Brooke's 'like swimmers into the cleanness leaping' sounds naive and unimaginative.)

If his dispassionate objectivity enabled him to see war in larger human terms, it also afforded him an opportunity to use apparently trivial incidents for aesthetic portrayal. For instance, he and his fellow-soldiers were greatly troubled by lice, and in a letter to Bottomley he had complained about the discomfort caused by them: 'I have gone less warmly clad during the winter than through the summer, because of the increased liveliness on my clothes. I've been stung to what we may call "dumping" a greater part of my clothing, as I thought it wisest to go cold than lousy.'<sup>85</sup> He created at least two poems out of such experiences. (And would have no doubt produced a painting had he got the opportunity to do so.) He treated the subject light-heartedly in 'The Immortals':

I called him Satan, Balzebub.  
But now I call him dirty louse.

But in the brilliant poem 'Louse-Hunting' the occasion was exploited for a heightened visualisation of details as well as for bringing out ironic contrasts between the soldiers' 'supreme flesh' and the lice's 'supreme littleness':



Then we all sprang and stript  
 To hunt the verminous brood.  
 Soon like a demon's pantomime  
 The place was raging.  
 See the silhouettes agape,  
 See the gibbering shadows  
 Mixed with the battled arms on the wall  
 See gargantuan hooked fingers  
 Pluck in supreme flesh  
 To smutch supreme littleness.

Rosenberg's memorable poems are those in which his aestheticism is directed towards creating the vision that came to him through a war-blasted landscape. His new experiences made him recognise the deeper implications of life in the presence of war. A poem like 'Break of Day in the Trenches' authentically embodies one such recognition. In that poem he presents a panoramic view of life which includes the human, the animal and the natural worlds. There is a pervading sense of gloom and stillness:

The darkness crumbles away—  
 It is the same old druid time as ever.

The poet notices a 'queer sardonic rat' and indulges in metaphysical conceit in order to emphasise the artificial barriers that have divided the fighting soldiers:

Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew  
 Your cosmopolitan sympathies.  
 Now you have touched this English hand  
 You will do the same to a German—

The rat ('the live thing') underlines the ironic contrast between its life and the denial of life to the men in the trenches, despite their 'strong eyes, fine limbs . . .'. The little animal, in fact, objectifies the issues involved in the war, and brings out the transience of all forms of life in the face of the 'impersonal immensity of war':

Poppies whose roots are in man's veins  
 Drop, and are ever dropping;

But mine in my ear is safe,  
Just a little white with the dust.

Poppies are here identified with men. They are dropping dead on battlefields, and the single poppy that is 'safe' on the back of the poet's ear is, in fact, as safe or precarious as the poet himself. As D. W. Harding has pointed out, 'there is here a cool distribution of attention over the rat, the poppy and the men which gives them all their due, is considerate of all their values, and conveys in their precise definition something of the impersonal immensity of war'.<sup>86</sup>

The bulk of Rosenberg's successful 'Trench Poems' is concerned with themes of suffering and death. The nature of death was one of the fundamental subjects that war brought to the forefront for the war poets. Rosenberg, who had experienced miseries all his life, was faced with the prospect of encountering the 'ultimate misery'—death—as a fighting soldier. But nobody could charge him, as Sorley rightly had charged Brooke, with being 'too obsessed with his own sacrifice'.<sup>87</sup> Rosenberg was much too good an artist to be sentimental about his own suffering, or indeed that of his comrades. In his essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot had remarked that 'the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates'. Rosenberg was striving to achieve such a distance, and this is one reason why his analysis and exploration of death are so memorable. The idea of death that haunted him is beautifully expressed in one of his finest poems; 'Returning, We hear the Larks'. This lyric is a brilliant example of the poet's ability to organise the different strands of feeling and ideas into an artistic whole. The opening lines create a sombre atmosphere, and a consciousness of sinister threats:

Sombre the night is.  
And though we have our lives, we know  
What sinister threat lurks there.

Dragging these anguished limbs, we only know  
This poison-blasted track opens on our camp—  
On a little safe sleep.

The longer lines carry the prolonged anguish, only to be brought to a brief respite in the short line 'On a little safe sleep'. The sudden

revelation of joy and beauty at that moment of respite is expressed in lines of lyrical intensity:

But hark! joy—joy—strange joy.  
Lo! heights of night ringing with unseen larks.  
Music showering on our upturned list'ning faces.

The unexpected nature of the experience strains poetic articulation—'joy—joy—strange joy'—and the subsequent images (e.g., 'heights of night', 'unseen larks') tend to endow the whole experience with a mystical glow. But his inability to fully respond to this pure joy springs from his apprehension of the 'lurking threat':

Death could drop from the dark  
As easily as song—

Therefore, the lark's song, instead of becoming a symbol of pure joy and beauty, embodies concealed treacheries:

But song only dropped,  
Like a blind man's dream on the sand  
By dangerous tides,  
Like a girl's dark hair for she dreams no ruin lies there,  
Or her kisses where a serpent hides.

Far from taking the easier course of intensifying the moment of pure joy and beauty in order to present it in sharp contrast to threatened death's agonies, Rosenberg presents a totality of vision which explores the extent, and limit, of a beautiful experience in the context of war and death.

It is with a similar attitude that he explores death in the poem 'In War'. The personal sorrow (his brother's death) does not prevent him from viewing death as a generalised phenomenon, this time brought about by war. The poem conveys a sense of timelessness and sees death as part of the process of life:

In the old days when death  
Stalked the world  
For the flower of men,  
And the rose of beauty faded  
And pined in the great gloom . . .

The living, who bury the dead, do so with a quiet dignity, with the consciousness that it is a matter of mere 'chance' that they are living while others are dead:

But we whom chance kept whole—  
 But haggard,  
 Spent—were charged  
 To make a place for them who knew  
 No pain in any place.

Here a general participation in the tragedy of life and death precludes any kind of Owenesque pity. This being so, when in the succeeding stanzas the fact comes to light that one of the dead who were being buried was the poet's brother, the temptation to fall into a Sassoon-like hysteria :

for he howled and beat his chest  
 And all because his brother had gone west...  
 ('Lamentations')

is effectively checked.

He read my brother's name  
 I sank—  
 I clutched the priest.

So that he can return, in the last lines, to his earlier depersonalised, philosophic mood, now only a little heightened and elevated:

What are the great sceptered dooms  
 To us, caught  
 In the wild wave?  
 We break ourselves on them  
 My brother, our hearts and years.

Rosenberg's most remarkable poems are those in which his explorations of death yield a positive vision. In trying to evolve such a vision, he was helped by a mature understanding of life and literature. He did not think that modern life was particularly prone to suffering and anxiety—he asked one of his correspondents: 'If twentieth-century

is most awful, tell me what period do you feel most enviable?'<sup>88</sup>—and felt that human life has always been tragic. But at the same time he was also convinced that art, however sombre must concern itself with positive values. He believed that the distinguishing trait of great literature was its sense of dignity and strength:

When Milton writes on his blindness, how dignified he is? How grand? How healthy? What begins in a mere physical moan, concludes in a grand triumphant spiritual expression, of more than resignation, of conquest.<sup>89</sup>

No wonder then that he preferred literature that was joyous and inspiring :

I like to read something joyous—buoyant, a clarion call to life, an inspirer to endeavour, something that tells one life is worth living and not death is worth having.<sup>90</sup>

'Daughters of War' is a war poet's contribution to this body of literature. It is a highly symbolical poem. Rosenberg considered it to be his best poetic effort in which he had 'striven to get that sense of inexorableness the human (or unhuman) side of this war...the end is an attempt to imagine the severance of all human relationships, and the fading away of human life'.<sup>91</sup> He had obviously made some preliminary attempts to tackle the theme of this poem in some of his earlier verses. In a poem called 'Girl to Soldier on Leave', the mortal beloved of the soldier is already losing her battle with death, which later on was to take her lover into the arms of the Amazons of 'Daughters of War'. The Amazons need for their fulfilment 'the sons of valour'. Similarly, the men need the Amazons' 'huge embraces' for their own spiritual release:

So the soul can leap out  
Into their huge embraces.

The poet's visionary conception in which the 'Daughters of War' are beckoning the souls of the dead soldiers is indicated quite early in the poem :

I saw in prophetic gleams  
These mighty daughters in their dances

Beckon each soul aghast from its crimson corpse  
To mix in their glittering dances.

But the passage of the human soul lies only through 'savage death':

they have no softer lure—  
No softer lure than the savage ways of death.

However, the men are not quite willing to be enticed in this manner, not only because of the frightening prospect of death but also because they seem quite content with the physical and material benefits of this world:

We were satisfied of our lords the moon and the sun  
To take our wage of sleep and bread and warmth—

But on the other hand, they also realize that they:

must leap to the love-heat of these maidens  
From the flame of terrene days,  
Leaving grey ashes to the wind—to the wind.

And hence they give in. The last stanza of the poem is an excellent example of Rosenberg's growing maturity as a poet, because it evocatively projects the vision towards which all the earlier stanzas had been moving. He does this through a skilful manipulation of imagery. The Amazon, who speaks, uses appropriately romantic imagery to suggest the insufficiency of human life on this earth:

Frail hands gleam up through human quagmire and lips of ash  
Seem to wail, as in faded paintings  
Far sunken and strange.

This is followed by short, crisp lines of dry, hard images to convey that 'sense of inexorableness the human (or unhuman) side of war' and some kind of spiritual fulfilment:

'My sisters have their males  
Clean of the dust of old days  
That cling about these white hands

And yearns in those voices sad.  
 But these shall not see them,  
 Or think of them in days or years;  
 These are my sisters' lovers in other days and years.'

Some critics have expressed dissatisfaction with the poem because it is wholly in a symbolical mode and is not rooted in the reality of war. Perhaps the practices of Sassoon and Owen have so accustomed us to the 'realism' of war that we are not prepared for the treatment of the subject in purely symbolical terms. Yet, Rosenberg characteristically regarded, as we noted earlier, 'Daughters of War' to be his best poem. And he wanted his more ambitious play 'The Unicorn', to 'symbolize the war and all its devastating forces let loose by an ambitious and unscrupulous will'.<sup>92</sup> It is true that his (fragmentary) play fails as drama despite its impressive isolated passages, but Rosenberg's artistic strategy towards the war anticipated the manner in which the subject was to be tackled in the succeeding years. One thinks of David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, and the better poetry of the Second World War, especially that of Sidney Keyes, whose *The Wilderness* is a significant example of the symbolic treatment of war.

When Rosenberg said that in 'Daughters of War' he had striven 'to get that sense of inexorableness the human (or unhuman) side of war', he deliberately used the word 'unhuman' and not 'inhuman' because it suggests the supernatural quality of his vision. All along he was trying to articulate in his poetry the ideal that he had ascribed to the hero of his short story 'Rudolf': 'My ideal of a picture is to paint what we cannot see. To create, to imagine. To make tangible and real a figment of the brain.'<sup>93</sup> In 'The Unicorn' such a desire is symbolised in the quest for the 'beauty' of music:

Beauty is music's secret soul,  
 Creeping about man's senses.  
 He cannot hold it or know it ever,  
 But yearns and yearns to hold it once.  
 Ah! when he yearns not shall he not wither?

Thus, inevitably, a supernatural 'light' guided his human impulses:

I know the haze, the light,  
 I am a shuddering pulse

Hung over the abyss. I shall look up  
Even if I fall . . . .

(‘The Unicorn’)

It was in terms of this ideal that he was trying to resolve war’s atrocities in his poetry. He was able to do so magnificently in ‘Daughters of War’, but in ‘Dead Man’s Dump’ his performance is less impressive. The latter is not a unified poem because the poet’s too close an attention to realistic details around him has resulted in fitful speculations and digressions. But this much anthologised poem has been universally popular precisely for the reason which contributes to its poetic weakness: its stark realism and vivid record of ‘front-line existence’:

The wheels lurched over sprawled dead  
But pained them not, though their bones crunched,  
Their shut mouths made no moan.  
They lie there huddled, friend and foeman,  
Man born of man, and born of woman,  
And shells go crying over them  
From night till night and now.

This is done in the manner of Sassoon’s poem ‘Counter-Attack’, but whereas Sassoon was mainly concerned with presenting war’s carnage, this is only a starting point in Rosenberg’s poem. And as if to underline the inadequacy of an Owenesque attitude to war and poetry (the two poets of course never met, nor knew each other’s works), a war casualty is thus presented:

A man’s brains splattered on  
A stretcher-bearer’s face;  
His shook shoulders slipped their load,  
But when they went to look again  
The drowning soul was sunk too deep  
For human tenderness.

Rosenberg had once made a general point that he was concerned with a ‘significant idea’ controlling a poem. What he has been trying to do in this poem is to see death as a gateway to a merger of the human soul with cosmic forces, in the manner of Dylan Thomas of ‘A



Refusal to Mourn...’ He had sent a copy of this poem to Edward Marsh, remarking, ‘I can now, I am sure, plead the absolute necessity of fixing an idea before it is lost, because of the situation it’s conceived in.’<sup>94</sup> So dominant was this intention that the poem seems to have some kind of an inverted order. The ‘conclusion’ is powerfully presented in the initial stanzas, whereas the subsequent ones are devoted to ‘exposition’. The death and destruction described in the second stanza of the poem is seen as the fulfilment of some kind of natural intention, through which mutual strength is achieved:

Earth has waited for them,  
All the time of their growth  
Fretting for their decay :  
Now she has them at last!  
In the strength of their strength  
Suspended—stopped and held.

This is only a variation of the theme of ‘Daughters of War’. Here, instead of the Amazons, it is nature which longs for man’s passage through death for the ultimate fusion of the two. Once this fusion has taken place, possibilities of immortality are there:

What fierce imaginings their dark souls lit?  
Earth! have they gone into you!  
Somewhere they must have gone,  
And flung on your hard back  
Is their soul’s sack  
Emptied of God-ancestral essence.

Similarly, in the next stanza, possibilities of life through death are presented as gently as the inevitable death (note the repeated use of ‘doomed’) is presented impersonally:

None saw their spirit’s shadow shake the grass  
Or stood aside for their half used life to pass  
Out of those doomed nostrils and the doomed mouth.  
When the swift iron burning bee  
Drained the wild honey of their youth.

One wishes that the poem had ended at this point, because the rest

of it tends to be descriptive and narrative, with meditative speculation thrown in. There is slackness in the narrative as the poet goes on to consider the fate of the living, which provokes a hysterical outburst —'Maniac Earth! howling and flying, your bowel seared....'—and that is not consistent with the concept of 'Earth' in the earlier stanzas of the poem. However, it is true that a renewed consideration of death results in a passionate exploration of it (death) as something absolute:

Burnt black by strange decay  
 Their sinister faces lie,  
 The lid over each eye,  
 The grass and coloured clay  
 More motion have than they,  
 Joined to the great sunk silences.

But these lines seem to suggest the impossibility of responding to any kind of spiritual promise, the motives of which response appear to have been negated by the horrors of war. This is contrary to the poetic affirmation made in the first five stanzas of the poem. Rosenberg was apparently aware of the risk involved here when he spoke of the need 'of fixing an idea before it is lost'. In an earlier letter to Marsh, he had made the valid criticism of the poem: 'I don't think what I have written is very good but I think the substance is, and when I work on it I'll make it fine.'<sup>95</sup> It is not known whether Rosenberg ever got the opportunity of revising the poem: most probably he did not. But what is clear is the feeling that, unlike Alun Lewis later on, Rosenberg needed to get away from the subject in order to distil its essence, and create poetry focussing on 'one distinguished emotion'.

That Rosenberg did not have the time or the opportunity to develop to the fullest extent his imaginative and technical resources is evident from the comparative failure of 'The Unicorn' (which is unfinished anyway), and the obscurity and even incoherence of so many of his poems. But that is not to say that he was merely 'a poet of promise' who showed his potentialities only in occasional flashes. His 'Trench Poems' contain achieved poetry, which is remarkable for its positive and apocalyptic vision of life, and an original and individual use of language and technique. It seems that he came to maturity during the war years, and his war experiences nerved him to come to grips with the terrible realities of life and death. He projected, through the war

theme, not only the physical suffering in the trenches, but also the tragic vision of human existence that came to him. Thus, in any discussion of modern English war poetry, Rosenberg's distinction would appear to lie in the fine achievement of his poetry, and also in his having been the first among the poets who wrote, and some of whom died, during the First World War, to explore the possibility of treating war in aesthetic rather than propagandistic terms.

Rosenberg's singular achievement, in fact, underlines the limitations of the kind of poetry most of his fellow war poets wrote. Poetry is more than a mere record of events in a particular age, and one would expect that one of the greatest crises of modern civilisation would have excited the tragic imagination of the artists. But as Robert Nichols himself admitted, when he came to edit in 1943 an *Anthology of War-Poetry 1914-1918*, that poetry was essentially a recreation of the catastrophic events, without the force and power of a tragic vision:

In these poems pity and terror may be—and indeed often are—separately or even simultaneously present but the quality of feeling called 'tragic' is not often present. Why? Because in the absence of fatality which is revealed in the relation of the part to the whole the tragic cannot exist. (p. 17)

'Tragedy' is the spectacle of man's spiritual triumph within his physical defeat. But most of these war poets were too close to their subject-matter to be able to contemplate anything but defeat. Their poetry, therefore, is catastrophic rather than tragic, and it is further restricted by the fact that it is selective and personal. Situated as they were, most of these poets saw the soldiers as suffering in isolation from the civilians who lived in comparative safety. And since their main aim appears to have been the desire to bring home to the civilians the magnitude of their suffering, and the pity of it, there apparently was no room for the comprehensiveness of tragic vision. The examples of Sorley and Rosenberg demonstrate the possibilities of creating tragic poetry, only if the poets concerned came to the theme of war with an imaginative mind, enriched by literary and personal experiences. Rosenberg succeeded to a considerable extent, whereas Sorley's 'literary' background proved vulnerable when he was suddenly confronted by the fierceness of actual events. Sorley's sad 'capitulation' is significant, because it points to the particular dilemma of the poets of the First World War. The unheard-of atrocities of the war prevented

the poets from viewing the soldiers' sufferings in wider human, cosmic terms. No wonder then that Robert Graves decided to suppress most of his war poems, and that Edmund Blunden had some such attitude towards his own war poems.<sup>96</sup> Herbert Read's books of war poems, *Naked Warrior* and *Ecolgues* (both published in 1919) were concerned with the brutal 'realism' of war, but it was only after the war was over that, in 1933, he published *The End of the World*, which explored the 'higher reality' of war. In a post-script to the poem, he made an important point which contains an implicit criticism of the poetry of the First World War:

It is not my business as a poet to condemn war (or, to be more exact, modern warfare). I only wish to present the universal aspects of a particular event. Judgement may follow, but shall never precede or become embroiled with the act of poetry.

All such facts and criticisms are brought in only to indicate the almost unavoidable limitations which were imposed on the poets who were writing in the midst of the war. But these observations must not be allowed to obscure the fine achievements of some of their writings. Sorley's poignant contemplation of death, Sassoon's righteous anger against hypocrisy and greed, Owen's sensitivity, fellow-feeling and deep compassion, all produced memorable poems. Historically speaking, their performance has proved to be extremely significant. They brought in a decisive break with the poetry of the pre-war years, and paved the way for the succeeding poetry of the 'Age of Anxiety'. Poets like Pound and Eliot had already been working on revolutionary lines, but they did not make their impact felt until the war was over. As we saw in the previous chapter, the dominant trend in the poetry of the pre-war years was towards treating simple and less controversial subjects. In Sorley's words, this was the poetry of the 'small-holdings' type. But after the war poets had unmasked the reality of the twentieth century civilisation, the road was clear for poems like *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) and *The Waste-Land* (1922), the latter having had a particularly profound influence on English poetry of the post-war decades. The war poet, in his determination to shake an apathetic public into a recognition of the 'truth', was more in line with Pound and Eliot than with Edward Marsh, who was content with 'educating' and pleasing the public taste. No doubt, the war poet was not able to create the poetic technique that would have measured up to the

intensity of his subject-matter, so that we find poets like Sassoon and Owen desperately trying to accommodate their new sensibility within the fragile (Georgian) mould. Nevertheless, he eminently succeeded in breaking away from the preceding poetic tendencies, and became the 'ancestor' of the kind of poetry which became so popular in the thirties. C. Day Lewis acknowledged this fact in his discussion of Owen, and observed :

Owen commends himself to the post-war poets largely because they feel themselves to be in the same predicament: they feel the same lack of a stable background against which the dance of words may stand out plainly, the same distrust and horror of the unnatural forms into which life for the majority of people is being forced . . his unsentimental pity, his savage and sacred indignation are the best of our heritage, and it is for his heirs to see that they are not wasted.<sup>97</sup>

But it is to 'war poetry' as such that the poets of the First World War made their greatest contribution. They stripped war of all its tinsel and romance, and showed for all times to come what it actually was. The war poetry of hundreds of years was put into the glass cases of museums, as it were, and no serious modern poet could now write of war in conventional and romantic terms. Besides, poets like Sassoon and Owen had expressed their sense of indignation and pity so fully and finally that the succeeding war poet was forced to discover, at the risk of repetition, new—and as it turned out, more poetic—ways of dealing with war. When war came again in 1939, the modern poet had no illusions about it, thanks to the poets of the First World War, so that he was able to see it just as another aspect of the tragedy of life, and devote himself to an exploration of the nature of that tragedy.

### THREE

## *Poetry of The Second World War*

THE POETS of the Second World War grew up, in the words of Alex Comfort, 'from early adolescence, in the almost complete certainty that (they) should be killed in action'.<sup>1</sup> Hence, unlike the poets of the First World War, they had no illusions to shed, nothing new to 'learn', nothing to 'inform' their audience about the terrible nature of modern warfare. In other words, Owen's idea of the poet's role in war had become obsolete, if not irrelevant, for them. But the war brought before them, in their fierce reality, truths of life and death and they directed their poetic energies towards such themes. In this they were helped by a general critical interest of the time in questions about the relationship between war and literature. During the previous war, really serious discussion about the literary potentialities of war as a theme was rare, and it was only fitfully carried out in journals like *Blast*, *Egoist* and the *English Review*. In contrast to this, a greater, and more sustained, critical awareness was now displayed not only by the older journals like *John O'London's Weekly*, the *Cornhill Magazine* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, but also by the *avant-garde* periodicals of the time, like Cyril Connolly's *Horizon* and John Lehmann's *Penguin New Writing*. The *Listener* published full-length articles on war poetry, notable among them being Stephen Spender's and Robert Graves's individual views about 'War Poetry in this War' (16 and 23 October 1941), and Henry Reed's evaluation of the relative merits of the poetry written during the two World Wars. (These appeared on two subsequent weeks, 18 and 25 January 1945). The *New Statesman* and the *Spectator* mainly confined themselves to publishing sensitive reviews of works by war artists. Across the Atlantic, war as a subject for literature was discussed and analysed in journals like *Partisan Review*, *Poetry*, the *New Republic* and the *Saturday Review of Literature*.

At the beginning of the war, Cyril Connolly felt that it was stifling the voice of the English Muse. In the editorial comment of the *Horizon* (May 1940), he admitted to receiving from two to three hundred contributions every month, but found them unusable for lack of literary

merit. He argued that since 'the intelligentsia (was) confused and muddled', there was little possibility of creative arts flowering forth from the men in uniform.

The war is the enemy of creative activity, and writers and painters are wise to ignore it and concentrate their talent on other subjects. Since they are politically impotent, they can use this time to develop at deeper emotional levels, or to improve their weapons by technical experiment. (p. 314)

But Connolly had gone on to remark that 'the artist and the intellectual are lucky to be alive. They must celebrate by creating more culture as fast as they can', and he concluded with praise for Eliot's 'East Coker', which had recently appeared in *New English Review* (21 March 1940). The implication was that art could be cultivated, at that time, only by those artists who were not personally involved in the war. George Orwell too expressed similar sentiments when he warned: 'But don't look for any book of consequence to be published in England in the near future, for the people who are still young enough to learn are most of them too busy or too depressed to write.'<sup>2</sup> Beneath such dark prognostications one can detect a higher set of literary standards which the war poetry, written so far, had not measured up to. Thus, W. D. Thomas explained, in his article 'War and the Poet' (*Listener*, 1 May 1941), that war does *not* 'provide the poet with the best harvest-time'. About the poetry of the First World War, he declared that 'most of the verse written by the soldier in the last war is just a record of sensations. It is photographic—the photograph of a devastated area as it were, the materials out of which poetry may grow: but it is not poetry.'

Stephen Spender's explanation for the lack of creative activity in England was that 'creative writers in wartime England (had) no status at all. They (were) neither reserved, nor given any kind of work as writers in the way that some journalists and painters who (were) appointed "official war artists" or asked to do camouflage (were).'<sup>3</sup> In fact, Spender was joined by other writers, including Orwell, Alun Lewis and Arthur Koestler, in his demand, 'Why not War Writers? A Manifesto', in which special facilities were demanded for 'war writers'. They believed that the journalists, for whom the Government had made special provisions, were not as effective propagandists as creative writers could be: they pointed out that artists' 'propaganda

was deeper, more humanly appealing and more imaginative than newspaper men had space and time for'.<sup>4</sup> In the light of the dubious results of the setting-up of the Writers' War Board in America, one may have reason to be happy that no one gave any special attention to the pleas of Spender and his fellow artists. Babette Deutsch wrote an article in 1942 called 'The Poet And the War', in which she severely (and rightly) criticised a shocking poem, 'The Murder of Lidice', by Edna St. Vincent Millay, in which Hitler is shown as sitting

With his long and cruel thumbs  
Eating pastries, molding the crumbs  
Into bullets. . . .

Miss Deutsch castigated the Writer's War Board for accepting and promoting such a piece, and accused it in these terms:

The Board was created at the instance of the Treasury Department in need of bond salesmen. Its president is a composer of popular detective stories who, for all his skill, does not seem to have discovered the body. That corpse is the sort of poetry that lies unburied in Miss Vincent's 'The Murder of Lidice'.<sup>5</sup>

It was, however, John Lehmann who was most qualified (so it seems now in retrospect) to predict how the war was going to affect English literature. Early in the Autumn 1941 issue of his *Penguin New Writing*, he disagreed with the contemporary critics who felt that the guns were silencing creative imagination. As regards the more established writers, John Lehmann pointed out that, in spite of the difficult conditions, they continued to write, and that some of them, in fact, had profited from their new experiences:

These writers too have changed, and in writing on themes connected with the war, have shown that so far from having exhausted their capacity to respond to new experiences, they have it in them still to produce perhaps their most remarkable and fruitful work.<sup>6</sup>

And speaking of the younger writers, he admitted that though most of them were producing very little of real literary significance, there were signs of hope:

Nevertheless, I do receive a surprising number of MSS from young



soldiers and sailors and airmen as well as civilians: the desire to interpret, to create is undoubtedly there. This makes me feel that writers of the future, training in the hardest of schools, are slowly forming themselves behind these imitative and uncertain attempts. One or two have already some memorable poems and sketches to their credit, and these are gradually appearing in print.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of quantity, the output of verse at the beginning of the Second World War was considerable, if not abundant. Hence, when the cry arose 'Where are our war poets?', *Horizon*, in January 1941, came out with the answer: 'under your nose'. That very year, Tom Harrison remarked in his rather humorous review, 'War Books', that there was a considerable amount of war literature, though 'ninety-five per cent of it is stuff I would never have read, or even imagined could be written, before 300 pages at 8s. 6d. a time.'<sup>8</sup> Thus, despite Keidrych Rhys's<sup>9</sup> protestation, in 1941, that the war poet was not getting an adequate hearing from the reading public, the situation was good and it continued to improve in the subsequent years, when not only did the various journals publish poems written by 'the man in uniform', but as many as a dozen anthologies of war poetry appeared in England alone during the war years. Then there were poets like Alun Lewis, Sidney Keyes, Drummond Allison and Roy Fuller, to name only a few of the many, who got their individual collections published during those years.

If critics and editors were wary, it is understandable because—and this fact is seldom realised—much of this poetry was conventional stuff. In his review of 'War Books', which I have previously referred to, Tom Harrison lamented:

You see, much wartime writing has got itself into a mess. Two years of it resolutely ignores the vast pattern of change of which we are now part, playing up the traditional and orthodox themes, emphasising personal heroisms and frequently falsifying them.<sup>10</sup>

The public, as is its invariable wont, thirsted for patriotic poetry,\* and some such desire was at the core of the farious demand, 'Where are our war poets?' When Henry Reed, in a series of two articles in the *Listener* entitled 'Poetry in War Time', picked out men like Vernon Watkins, Alun Lewis and Sidney Keyes as the significant poets,

\*Rupert Brooke's *Complete Poems* was printed six times between 1942 and 1945.

who had emerged since the start of the Second World War, one correspondent asked, in earnest solemnity:

Now I would like to ask, in a purely scientific-objective spirit, whether there is a single four-line sequence (leave alone an entire short poem) to the credit of any of the poets mentioned by Mr. Reed which has in the same way struck the popular imagination and become property, as did, say, several poems of Rupert Brooke on publication?<sup>11</sup>

To this Henry Reed made the blunt rejoinder that Rupert Brooke 'was a poet for the thoughtless, and there is no fundamental difference between his war poetry and the present-day song beginning "There'll always be an England"'.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, some poets and critics pandered to the public's hunger for sentimental patriotic verse. The editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature* pointed out that 'it was neither idle nor base to die for one's country in a struggle like the present one, and we need the poets to give us a few rousing songs to march by'.<sup>13</sup> Some poets, it is true, genuinely felt that the war gave them a sense of release from a dull and monotonous life. Jocelyn Brooke recalled, later in his life:

It is fashionable nowadays...to mock at my namesake, Rupert Brooke's (no relation by the way) 'Swimmers into cleanness leaping' and so forth: but the fact is that, for people like myself, this reaction could be as valid in 1939... as it was in 1914.<sup>14</sup>

No wonder significant war poetry did not come from people like Jocelyn Brooke, who looked backwards. Henry Treece too found that he had little to say, as a poet, because his concept of the poet's role in wartime was identical to that professed by the poets of the First World War: Treece had said, 'I feel that it is the poet's duty as a man to fight physically, but I maintain that it is his duty as a poet to heal the result of that fighting now, and to prevent such horrors for the future'.<sup>15</sup> Timothy Corsellis had genuine poetic talent, but he began writing poetry in the manner of Sassoon:

Laugh, laugh, you soldier sons,  
Joke on your way to the war

For your mother won't laugh at the sound of guns  
And the tales of filth and the gore.

Smile and joke, young sailor Jack.  
For it's the same old story,  
There'll be no jokes when you come back  
And bloody little glory.

And 'Dawn After the Raid' echoes the sentiments of Owen's 'Futility'.

This mangled corpse once breathed slum air  
Lived in the grey dust where it died,  
Is it for this that bending we strived  
And fought in others' blood and others' sorrow  
To reach these wretched religious remains?

Corsellis was, apparently, moving towards fresher approaches towards the subject of war, as is shown in poems like '“I” Always “I”' and 'The Thrush to N.A.W.', but he died early in action in 1941.

Obviously, not many good poems could be written now in the old manner. A fresh and new attitude towards war had become inevitable for any serious poet writing during the Second World War. Only an amateurish versifier could have remained content with treating the subject in purely conventional terms, refusing thereby to recognise the changed physical realities and the literary attitudes of the time. In purely physical terms, the nature of the war in 1939 was different from the one in 1914. As a veteran of the First World War, Robert Graves explained the difference thus:

It will be realized in the first place that the passing of the Conscription Act, a few weeks before World War II, made volunteer pride irrelevant, and war poetry was unnecessary as a stimulant to recruiting. Next, the British Army has not yet been engaged on a grand scale with the enemy; and despite official reassurances, may never be. The soldier has, on the whole, lived a far safer life than the munition worker whom in World War I he despised as a 'shirker'; he cannot even feel that his rendezvous with death is more certain than that of Aunt Fanny, the firewatcher. As for

the beauty of the English countryside, he has seen far too much of it through a tent-flap during his dreary exile<sup>16</sup>

And Graves went on to add, in 1949: 'Deliberate heroism was so far outmoded as to seem vulgar or quaint. Besides they (the war poets) saw no need to compete with the trained war-correspondent, who lived rough, brought his report back from the place of the greatest danger and told the whole truth—even if part of the truth was censored afterwards.'<sup>17</sup> There was another very important consideration, and that was the realisation that the war, even though it was evil, had to be fought in order to prevent men, art and letters from being wiped out by Nazi occupation. In the words of Cyril Connolly, '... the intellectuals recoil from the war as if it were a best-seller. They are enough ahead of their time to despise it, and yet they must realize that they nevertheless represent the culture that is being defended.'<sup>18</sup> Thus, the poet's attitude to war now was less straightforward and more ambiguous than it ever was in the past. The poet knew that war was evil yet he also recognised the tragic necessity of his participation in it.

More importantly, the literary developments in the inter-war years can explain to a very large extent the better poets' very different attitude to the 1939-45 war. Already in the latter half of the 1930's there had begun a conscious reaction against the prevailing 'social poetry'. C. Day Lewis spoke, in 1936, of a 'reaction from the recent preoccupation of poets with social justice, their possibly over-mechanized vocabulary, and often slapdash technique: a return to the ideals of poetic integrity and artistic individualism: a setting out in the direction of "pure" poetry'.<sup>19</sup> This was, of course, the neo-romanticism which was exemplified in the works of George Barker, David Gascoyne and Dylan Thomas, all of whom were influenced, directly or indirectly, by the Surrealist movement which had begun in France in the nineteen-twenties. It first received great publicity in England when the first International Surrealist Exhibition was held in London in June 1936. The same year, Herbert Read edited an anthology of Surrealist poems and paintings under the title *Surrealism* (and a year earlier, David Gascoyne had written a short book *A Survey of Surrealism*). Also in 1936 appeared Roger Roughton's Surrealist review, *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, which ran for eighteen months during which time ten numbers appeared. Roughton published, in his review, translations from Surrealist masters like Breton, Eluard, Peret and

Picasso, and also works of Dylan Thomas, George Barker and Roy Fuller.

It must be admitted, though, that these English poets were Surrealists in a rather superficial sense. The original impulse of the French Surrealists, which sought 'inner reality' by abandoning all forms of rationalism in favour of a belief in automatic writing, unchecked by selectivity, did not entirely succeed in striking roots in the English temperament. The English accepted the Romantic principles of Surrealism, but came out with their own much publicised version of it in the form of the Apocalyptic Movement at the beginning of the nineteen-forties. Three young men, G. S. Fraser, F. J. Hendry and Henry Treece, were the moving spirits behind the movement. They wanted to liberate poetry from purely objective reporting, and tended to view human personality in its entirety, with emphasis both on emotion and intellect, and on the realities of dream life as well as of wakeful consciousness. Moving away from the followers of Auden and Grigson, the new poets exalted imagination and myth. In short, their poetry signalled a return to private experiences and vision, to the simple and the natural, the more fundamental human themes. Their immediate ancestors were Dylan Thomas, Herbert Read and George Barker (who were essentially primitivistic and mystical on the lines of Blake and Lawrence) rather than any foreign models.

G. S. Fraser wrote an introduction to a collection of Apocalyptic verse, *The White Horsemen*,<sup>20</sup> in which he explained the ideals of the movement. To start with, he pointed out how the new movement sprang from, and developed beyond, the original impulse of Surrealism. The positive aspect of Surrealism that the Apocalyptic verse sought to adopt was the concern with man's submerged being, but it denied what was negative in Surrealism—'Surrealism's own denial of man's right to exercise control, either of his political or social destinies, or of the material offered to him as an artist, by his subconscious mind'.<sup>21</sup> Fraser went on to explain that the more established social poets of the time sacrificed the eternal for the topical, and hence were in danger of losing sight of the essential nature of poetry, which the Apocalyptics were trying to recapture:

Nobody denies the immediate social impact of much of the poetry of Auden, Spender and MacNiece. But it was, to a certain extent, an impact of the surface and of the moment. The war, as a matter of fact, has made that sort of immediate political approach, that clear-

cut partisanship, a practical impossibility. But to have social value, poetry does not have to show immediate relevance. In 'stripping the individual darkness from their own wills', the Apocalyptics are likely to discover certain fundamental disharmonies of human life, certain root causes of baseness and littleness, which will not vanish away, as if by magic, in the just city. In short, if the poetry of the Auden generation had a certain immediate social and political value, the poetry of the Apocalyptics is likely to have a certain permanent clinical value for the human race.<sup>22</sup>

As a *theory* of poetry, it is so sound that it can accommodate the best poetry of all times. But the Apocalyptic movement was a failure, despite a few individual poems of promise and achievement, notably by Henry Treece, Vernon Watkins and Nicholas Moore. The romantic excesses, incoherence and frenzy produced bad verses, and they have deserved the obloquy that has been poured on them. Nevertheless, the experiment of the Apocalyptics was historically significant because they exposed the limitations of the poetry of social and political commentary, and, more importantly, they expressed the desire and need of the poets to come to terms with more enduring realities. In some ways they can be credited with having anticipated, along with the other 'romantics' of the decade, the later poetry of Auden and Spender, as well as the better poetry of the Second World War. Unfortunately, the experiment is generally dismissed summarily as some kind of an eccentricity off the main course of English poetry of the time. Babette Deutsch's judgement is balanced on this matter when she recognises that 'the significance of the Apocalypse movement was rather symptomatic than intrinsic'<sup>23</sup> Symptomatic is, indeed, the operative word here, because the Apocalyptic movement was a concrete manifestation of the growing romantic temperament of the time, which in turn can explain, to a great extent, the new attitude that the English poets developed towards the war. Alex Comfort was shrewd and imaginative enough to observe this phenomenon as early as 1943

The figure in English writing around whom the greater part of our romantic movement revolves is undoubtedly Herbert Read, into whose influence Spender, in his slow progress into Romanticism, is being drawn. Read has described the spirit of contemporary English verse as pacifist, in the sense that it has abandoned the idea of war

as a struggle, and has come to see it as a calamity which one must regard as one regards the storms. That will imply a withdrawal from any expectation that verse written now, like the verse of the thirties, can reasonably expect to exert an immediate social influence.<sup>24</sup>

As we shall see in our discussions of poets like Douglas, Lewis and Keyes, each of them was a conscious 'neo-romantic'. While they were careful to avoid the excesses of 'neo-romanticism', they were similarly determined that their poetry would not be directed towards exerting a social influence. War was, therefore, viewed not so much as a social or political phenomenon in their poetry but as a symbol of human tragedy.

A brief consideration of the poetry of the Spanish Civil War is relevant here because it shows that the theory of political poetry of the thirties started to betray its weaknesses when confronted by the catastrophe of war. Young poets of the Spanish Civil War, like John Cornford and Christopher Caudwell, were already dissatisfied with the older poets of the thirties, 'who wanted to be in the vanguard for social justice while clinging to the emotional luxury of being liberals, humanists and bourgeois poets'.<sup>25</sup> They wanted poets to identify both their lives and poetry more closely with Marxist ideals and hopes. And the Spanish Civil War offered them the ideal opportunity to concentrate their physical and poetic energies on 'the cause'. They were so committed, ideologically as well as politically, to the side of the Spanish Republic that some of them died for Spain. These heirs of Sassoon and Owen were aware of the brutalities of warfare, yet they eagerly participated in the war because they were convinced that they were fighting a 'just war', and that by fighting there they were in effect fighting against Fascism, the warmongers, the armament manufacturers and the militarists. In introducing *Poems For Spain*, Stephen Spender thus explained the moving impulse behind these poems:

Poets and poetry have played a considerable part in the Spanish Civil War, because to many people the struggle of the Republicans has seemed a struggle for the conditions without which the writing and the reading of poetry are almost impossible in modern society.<sup>26</sup>

Spender went on to identify the political aims of liberty with those of the poet, and remarked that 'this awakening of a sense of richness of a tomorrow *with* poetry, is as remarkable as the struggle for liberty

itself'. In effect Spender was only echoing the nineteenth century romantic-patriotic note which allied poetry with political freedom in the manner of Wordsworth. There is, indeed, some similarity between Wordsworth, Shelley and Byron on the one hand, and Cornford, Caudwell and Donnelly on the other, because all these English poets responded to the call for liberty, even in foreign lands.

Much of the 'heroic' poetry of the Spanish Civil War, even though it sprang from the noblest of motives, seems rhetorical and brash, perhaps more so in the light of the fiercely anti-war poetry of the First World War. The English Muse suffered rather than gained from such a sentimental attitude. Early in 1941, George Orwell noted that 'the Spanish Civil War, with its orgies of lying and its frightening revival of the war propaganda of 1914-18 drove away the more talented of them (i.e., poets)'.<sup>27</sup> A large number of English poets vociferously supported the Republicans while staying on in England, and their verses have the superficiality and noise of the utterances of traditional arm-chair patriots. Jack Lindsay was one of many such poets who wrote rhetorical—and often hysterical—verses, glorifying the fight of the 'workers' against Fascism and tyranny. While he could write absurd lines like 'workers, going to battle, / Went as to a fiesta', his more characteristic note was declamatory, as is evident in the concluding lines of the poem 'On Guard':

Workers of the world, unite for us  
that bear the burden of all.  
You shall not hear us complain  
that the wolves of death are ravaging in our streets,  
if you but understand, if your bodies flow  
into this steel of resistance, this welded mass,  
making you one with us, and making us  
unconquerable.

H. B. Mallailieu's few poems also seem to be dominated by dogma rather than poetic experience. For instance, in 'Spain 1938', tears and 'the suffering mind' are ignored and the irrelevance of pity is asserted, for a greater political cause

Tears are no use, the suffering mind is mad.  
Let sanity have strength and men unite  
Who in their individual lives are glad



That what remains of peace may yet prove strong.  
 We have the will, then let us show the might  
 We have forborne and pitied for too long.

More interesting poetry came from the poet-volunteers who actively fought and died in the Spanish war. Though their poems too were firmly regulated by dogma, poetic tension arose out of the realisation of fear and uncertainty that came to them from their actual experiences in the battle-field. Among the poet-volunteers, the most famous were John Cornford, Christopher Caudwell, Julian Bell and Charles Donnelly, all of whom had established reputations as writers even before the war. Of these, Julian Bell was killed only six weeks after his arrival in Spain, and Caudwell (whom D. E. S. Maxwell regards as the most promising among the poets who died in that war)<sup>28</sup> lost his life within two months of joining the army. Only Cornford and Donnelly wrote poetry out of their actual experiences in Spain and Cornford was the more promising of the two.

John Cornford was a deeply committed Communist. As an undergraduate at Cambridge, he actively participated in politics, and wanted to use poetry as an instrument for bringing about a revolution on Marxist lines. In his 'Keep Culture out of Cambridge', he dismissed virtually the entire poetry of the twentieth century, and foretold the coming of 'party' poetry of more serious social conscience:

There's none of these fashions have come to stay,  
 And there's nobody here got time to play.  
 All we've brought are our party cards  
 Which are no bloody good for your bloody charades.

His own war poem, 'Full Moon at Tierz: Before the Storming of Hucsca', celebrates the names of the party figures and events:

All round the barren hills of Aragon  
 Announce our testing has begun.  
 Here what the Seventh Congress said,  
 If true, if false, is live or dead,  
 Speaks in the Oviedo mauser's tone.

Three years ago Dimitrov fought alone  
 And we stood taller when he won.

But now the Leipzig dragon's teeth  
 Sprout strong and handsome against death,  
 And here an army fights where there was one

Though this poem deals with a pretty conventional Communist theme, namely, that history can be changed by revolutionising the economic structure of the society, and the future would be what men make of it, there are parts of it which suggest that the poet in Cornford was asserting himself against the propagandist. Take, for instance, the following stanza, in which—amidst the bravado and fiery spirit of the rest of the poem—there is a recognition of the weakness of the flesh and of the inner war

There let my private battle with my nerves,  
 The fear of pain whose pain survives,  
 The love that tears me by the roots,  
 The loneliness that claws my guts,  
 Fuse in the welded front our fight preserves.

The tension in the poem vibrates as the will clashes with the weakness of the flesh, even though resolution is forced through the rhetoric of the concluding lines: 'Raise the red flag triumphantly for Communism and for liberty'. Cornford had earlier written a similar poem, 'As our Might Lessens', in which he realised that 'No abstraction of the brain/Will counteract the animal pain', and that 'this fear haunts us all/Flesh still is weak'. But he was determined that by sheer will power he would be able to give 'nerve and bone and muscle to the word'. Thus he could end the poem on a note of political optimism and hope:

But moving in the masses' blood  
 Vienna, Amsterdam, Madrid  
 The ten-year-sleeping-image of the storm

Shews us that we stand to gain  
 If through this senseless-seeming pain,  
 If through this hell we keep our nerve and pride.

What gives special interest to Cornford's poetry is this kind of attempt to burn out self-questionings and fears through the fire of political idealism. A fellow-poet, Tom Wintringham, had noted

after Cornford's death, that from his outward appearance nobody could guess that his assured and confident manner 'was armour worn over a poet's sensitiveness, over a horror-hatred of "this death is a background to our lives"'.<sup>29</sup> But towards the end of his brief poetic career, his 'poet's sensitiveness' was beginning to assert its own claims, and was refusing to be submerged in political idealism. This is evident from the poignancy and humanity of his fine lyric 'Heart of the Heartless World'. It is basically a subjective love-lyric, addressed to his friend Margot Heinemann, and even if one agrees with Fraser or Press<sup>30</sup> that the poem has political overtones, its identification of sexual love with the love of the 'cause', and the resultant recognition of the tragic nature of such a love, indicates a shift from Cornford's hitherto unshaken belief in the positive outcome of the struggle. The central value that this poem celebrates is his love for his friend, and as a soldier faced with death, he is greatly worried about losing her. He also becomes apprehensive of feeling fear, and believes that she can give him strength in his predicament.

The wind rises in the evening  
Reminds that autumn is near.  
I am afraid to lose you  
I am afraid of my fear.

On that last mile to Heusca,  
The last fence for our pride  
Think so kindly, dear, that I  
Sense you at my side.

Fear on the part of a fiery political crusader is in itself quite unexpected. What is more, there is an apprehension of death, which instead of being regarded as glorious in an ideal cause—as in Miguel Hernandez's 'The Winds of the People':

Singing I wait for death,  
For there are nightingales that sing  
above the rifles' voice  
and in the battle's midst

—is acknowledged simply as a stroke of 'bad luck' that can be justified only by love:

If bad luck should lay my strength  
 Into the shallow grave,  
 Remember all the good you can;  
 Don't forget my love.

Unfortunately, volunteer-poets like Cornford and Donnelly died too young and too early in the war to be able to record all the responses to the fluctuating fortunes of the Spanish Republican cause. But non-combatants like Auden, Spender, Day Lewis and MacNiece were able to deal with the theme more comprehensively and, to a certain extent, more objectively. Poets like Herbert Read and George Barker expressed, in their few poems about the Spanish War, their 'humanistic' attitude towards the war, and dwelt on the suffering and the inhumanity of the conflict rather than on the rightness or the wrongness of 'the cause'. Louis MacNiece, too, was eventually to draw inspiration from the survival of permanent human values in the midst of war. At the beginning of the war, he was naively hopeful about the outcome:

Not knowing that our blunt  
 Ideals would find their whetstone, that our spirit  
 Would find its frontier on the Spanish front  
 Its body in a rag-tag army.

(*'Autumn Journal'*)

C. Day Lewis was openly 'heroic' in poems like 'The Volunteer' and 'The Nabara'. However, such hopes and enthusiasm soon gave way to disillusionment and cynicism, as the Fascists and militarymen gained increasing control over Spain. The English poets came to realise that the war was not at all what they had expected it to be, so that in a poem like 'The Two Armies' we find Spender back to square one:

When the machines are stilled a common suffering  
 Whitens the air with breath and makes both one  
 As though these enemies slept in each other's arms.

W. H. Auden's 'Spain 1937' (despite the fact that he repudiated the poem later on) is perhaps the most comprehensive, prophetic and brilliant poem of the Spanish Civil War. He starts with a firm

allegiance to the Republican cause, but goes on to chart out past, present and future history with impersonal austerity. In his refusal to be blinded to the essential truths of history by political considerations and personal loyalties, Auden is almost like the Years of 'Easter 1916'. After the controlled celebration of man's triumph over ignorance and superstition in the earlier stanzas, Auden concludes the poem on a sombre note, with premonitions of disaster:

The stars are dead: the animals will not look:  
We are left alone with our day, and the  
time is short and History to the defeated  
May say Alas but cannot help or pardon.

This was written in 1937, and by the beginning of 1939 Franco was firmly established in power and history was already saying 'Alas' as all the champions of the Republican cause lay defeated. As Julian Symons noted in his review of the period, 'the great tide of left-wing feeling had receded beyond the bounds of vision, and the land it had covered was as smooth, almost as though the tide had never been'.<sup>31</sup>

For the English poet there was a clear lesson, that instead of concerning himself with comparatively ephemeral subjects like social themes and political ideals, he must devote himself to something deeper, more human and more enduring. That is why at the beginning of the Second World War we find Auden sitting in New York, seeing himself and his fellow-men as frightened children:

Lost in a haunted wood  
Children afraid of the night  
Who have never been happy or good,

and seeking to understand the phenomenon in primordial terms:

Those to whom evil is done  
Do evil in return.

(‘September 1, 1939’)

It is not surprising that against such a poetical—and political—background, the English poets who wrote about, and some of whom died in, the Second World War should have produced poetry which

was introspective and ironic rather than social and hysterical. Herbert Read set the tone for these poets in his 'To a Conscript of 1940', in which he encounters a soldier of the previous war who has come to the grim realisation that 'Our victory was our defeat'. Thus he can help the poet to view his war, and his role in it, with a greater sense of reality:

Theirs is the hollow victory. They are deceived  
But you, my brother, my ghost if you can go  
Knowing there is no reward, no certain use  
In all your sacrifice, then honour is reprieved.

To fight without hope is to fight with grace  
The self reconstructed, the false heart repaired.

Similarly, C. Day Lewis, in reply to the clamour for 'war poetry', wrote a dignified epigram (which first appeared in *Penguin New Writing*, February 1941), spelling out the poet's role in the Second World War:

They who in panic or mere greed  
Enslaved religion, market, laws,  
Borrow our language now and bid  
Us to speak up in freedom's cause.

It is the logic of our times,  
No subject for immortal verse,  
That we who lived by honest dreams  
Defend the bad against the worse.

(*'Where Are the War Poets?'*)

Literary criticism on the subject, too, tended to emphasise the irrelevance of the previous 'war attitudes'. Both Stephen Spender and Robert Graves believed that the new war poetry would run on different lines. Spender remarked: 'I do not think it (the Second World War) will produce either a Rupert Brooke or a Wifrid (*sic*) Owen, because moods of naïf enthusiasm and of spiritual defeatism are equally unsuited to our times.'<sup>32</sup> There was an implicit rejection of the 'prophetic' role that Owen had given to a poet in times of war, and a general agreement that the term 'war poetry' was misleading because, to the

extent that it dealt with human suffering, it was simply 'poetry'. Geoffrey Grigson put the point succinctly:

Men have been tortured, women have been murdered, explosives have exploded, and I am in debt to a letter of Rilke's in which he said that the whole possibility of human suffering has already been, and is always being, experienced. It is the quantity, not the quality or depth of suffering, which has been increased by this war. That helps one, not to be indifferent, which is impossible, but not to be taken in by surprise and by the lewd rhetoric of a war, and to keep at best that degree of sanity one had before Chamberlain's voice announced over the air that England was fighting with Germany.

Should one's poems before have been about roses, and now about blood? Or shouldn't the blood and roses, the mortality and life have been mixed, as they always have been, at the times when a writer was most deeply possessed by life?<sup>83</sup>

But the term 'war poetry' can become meaningful when it is applied to a body of poetry whose 'poetical content' has been intensified and extended by war experiences. This is particularly true of the poetry of the Second World War. The war, ironically enough, enabled poets to realise human experience with greater depth and immediacy. In short, the war concretely represented the tragedy of human life.

If the war symbolised the human tragedy for some poets, they also looked for some kind of tragic affirmation in it. One burning flame of assurance, through the carnage and annihilation of war, lay in religious faith. A soldier, Goronwy Rees, wrote to *Horizon* in July 1940: 'I do not know if there are artists alive who can achieve this triumph, but if there are, I am certain that they will see in this war, as artists once saw in the crucifixion of Christ, not one more squalid incident in the interminable suicide of humanity, but tragic and terrible birth.' Edith Sitwell's 'Still Falls the Rain' measures up to Rees's ideals. Despite the evil and guilt which is shared by the whole of mankind, hope is symbolised by love and the Cross:

Still do I love, still shed my innocent light,  
my Blood, for thee.

And F. T. Prince makes a brilliant attempt, in his much-anthologised 'Soldiers Bathing', to see the present war's destruction in a historical perspective, and wring some meaning out of it in Christian terms:

For that rage, that bitterness, those blows,  
That hatred of the slain, what could they be  
But indirectly or directly a commentary  
On the Crucifixion? And the picture burns  
With indignation and pity and despair by turns,  
Because it is the obverse of the scene  
Where Christ hangs murdered, stripped, upon the Cross: I mean,  
That is the explanation of its rage.

Since man has always preferred the 'freedom of our crimes' to the terror 'of Christian love', 'sorrow and disgrace' must follow and the sky must for ever reflect *lacrimae Christi*. But precisely in this human tendency lie the possibilities of redemption. Thus, the poet finds that evil can be turned to good and he is filled with delight:

Yet, as I drink the dusky air,  
I feel a strange delight that fills me full,  
Strange gratitude, as if evil itself were beautiful,  
And kiss the wound in thought, while in the west  
I watch a streak of red that might have issued from Christ's breast.

Some such self-questioning infuses the poetry of the three major poets of the Second World War—Sidney Keyes, Alun Lewis and Keith Douglas. Keyes connected the war with the inner war of an individual in 'The Foreign Gate', and Lewis came to the realisation that

...though the state has enemies we know  
The greater enmity within ourselves.

(*'The Jungle'*)

Douglas, who was haunted and tormented by what he called his '*Bête Noire*'—the title of an unfinished poem—was in the process of exploring the nature of that terrible burden when he was suddenly killed in Normandy at the age of twenty-four. Thus, their war experiences led these poets into an examination of the darker recesses of the human



soul, and they were driven into a direct confrontation with the tragic nature of life.

Before we go on to discuss these three poets separately, and demonstrate their ability to take war as an integral part of their total poetic consciousness, one must realise that not many war poets were capable of creating poetry of that quality. The majority of these poets produced impressionistic poems, motivated by feelings of boredom and weariness, nostalgia and despair. Finding that neither a heroic stance nor a mood of protest was viable now, most of the poets accepted their role in war with stoic resignation. G. S. Fraser looked at death with tired apprehension and fatalism:

Many a fool as dull as I  
Now must rouse himself to die,  
Now must seek a colder bed  
Than the loneliest he had,  
Now must learn to die alone  
In the nakedness of bone.

(‘Poem’)

And Alan Rook evoked an ordinary soldier’s fear of pain and death:

Deeply across the waves of our darkness fear  
like the silent octopus feeling, groping, clear  
as a star’s reflection, nervous and cold as a bird,  
tells us that pain, tells us that death is near.

Inevitably, such a consciousness of death coloured almost all the subjects that the war poets touched. This can be seen in their poems about love. During the First World War, the poets were so concerned with the external fact of war that their intimate feelings of sexual love remained more or less dormant. But, during the 1939-45 war, poems about love were quite common, and they expressed feelings of nostalgia for the days gone by and of pain of separation from their beloveds. More interesting poems on this subject were those which avoided sentimentality. Roy Fuller’s ‘Letter to My Wife’ is one such poem in which the poet makes an honest effort to recognise the true nature of a soldier’s love in times of war:

I try to say that love is more solid than  
Our bodies, but I only want you here.

*I knew they created love and that the rest  
Is ghosts: War murders love.*

Francis Scarfe treats love in 'Barcarolle' in organic terms rather in the manner of Hardy's poem 'Neutral Tones'. He starts by speaking of happy times of love in earlier years—'My love, my love, fair was the river'—and then goes on to lament, in the succeeding stanzas, how the war has changed all this. As a result, the concluding stanza embodies a despairing concept of love:

My love, my love, foul was the river  
When night fell between the piers,  
Where blood and gall ran with the water  
And the sky dropped inhuman tears.

A similar bitter awareness colours the pictures of familiar landscapes and scenes. On this subject too there were countless poems written in the Georgian manner in which the sights and sounds of nature were lovingly noted and nostalgically celebrated. But then there were also some poems which, though they dealt with homely sentiments and rural beauty, were shot through with a complexity of feeling, irony, wit and ambiguity. Emmanuel Litvinoff saw the beautiful summer forest hideously transformed in war-time:

Here is a forest in full summer:  
Trees strong and tall like sentinels  
Guard the fierce marriage of their roots.

(*'Garrison Town'*)

Lastly, it may be pointed out that a large body of the English poetry of this time was concerned with foreign scenes and peoples. One of the features of the Second World War was that it moved over vast geographical areas and, inevitably, there were a considerable number of poems which were written against foreign backgrounds. There were various anthologies, like *Poems from Italy*, *Poems from France*, *Poems from the Desert* and *Poems from India*. Perhaps the most active group of English poets in exile was based in Alexandria, and their *Personal Landscape* was the most impressive among such anthologies. However, most of these poems were journalistic exercises in recording the strangeness and oddities of foreign scenes and peoples.

The majority of these poets, who wrote impressionistic poems about war, were generally concerned with the illumination of their private pains and frustrations. Their poems succeeded in achieving poetic individuality, and resonance, by being reflective and carrying something of the poet's personality. And though there was nothing revolutionary in their techniques, a judicious use of irony and restraint, free from the rhetoric of the propagandist and enervating romanticism of the sentimentalist, proved adequate to their needs.

## FOUR

### *Keith Douglas*

THOUGH STEPHEN SPENDER refused to include Keith Douglas among 'the most talented'<sup>1</sup> poets who perished in the Second World War, and the *Times Literary Supplement*<sup>2</sup> reviewer of Douglas's first edition of *Collected Poems*, found very little to commend in the actual poetic performance of Douglas, his editors and critics (who frequently happen to be poets themselves) have found in him a major poet of his times. One of the earliest published critical comments on him came from Olivia Manning. Speaking of the English poets who were writing in the Middle East during the war years, she remarked:

Among the younger men whom the army has brought out here, Keith Douglas stands alone. He has been in contact with the enemy much of the time and he is the only poet who has written poems comparable with the works of the better poets of the last war and likely to be read as war poems when the war is over. Hamish Henderson, John Waller and G. S. Fraser spent some time in Cairo. Henderson, too, has seen heavy fighting and has written one or two good poems, but his work is less individual and accomplished than that of Douglas.<sup>3</sup>

When Douglas died on 9 June 1944, his friends Bernard Spencer and M. J. Tambimuttu wrote laudatory obituary notes in *Personal Landscape* and *Poetry London* respectively. It was, however, G. S. Fraser who was perhaps the first to give a detailed critique of Douglas as a poet in his Chatterton Lecture at the British Academy in 1956.<sup>4</sup> In 1962, Ted Hughes wrote an article in the *Listener*, in which he pointed out that Douglas 'has produced what is to my mind a more inexhaustible body of poetry than any of his generation has produced since, in England or America'.<sup>5</sup> Hughes followed it up by writing another article, this time in *Critical Quarterly*,<sup>6</sup> in which he dwelt mainly on Douglas's astonishing mastery over a utility general-purpose style, as for instance Shakespeare's was. . . . Charles Tomlinson felt that Douglas was the most promising poet of the forties because with

his integrated poetic vision and linguistic control, Douglas avoided the sentimentality and the lushness of the neo-romantics on the one hand, and 'the slick formalism of Empson's successors'<sup>7</sup> on the other.

Keith Castellain Douglas\* was born on 24 February 1920 at Tunbridge Wells, Kent. When he was eight, his father left the family, and Keith was brought up single-handedly by his mother. At the age of six he went to boarding school—Edgeborough, in Guildford—and when eleven he proceeded to Christ's Hospital on the Nomination Examination. Even as a schoolboy, he showed interest in poetry and painting, and he regularly contributed poems and woodcuts to the school magazine *The Outlook*. At the age of sixteen he had his poem 'Dejection' published in Grigson's *New Verse*, which was certainly an encouraging recognition of his original poetic talent. He went to Merton College, Oxford in 1938, where his tutor was Edmund Blunden, who has recorded his impressions of the pupil in the Introduction to Douglas's *Collected Poems* (1966).

While at Oxford, Douglas also received training as a painter at the Slade School of Art, which had been evacuated from London at the beginning of the war. He was very proficient at drawing and sketching, as is evident from his various works that are lodged, along with his manuscripts, in the British Museum. His painter's eye was to help him in his poetry too when he wanted, for instance, to depict a war-blasted landscape or Russian soldiers frozen to death in battlefields. Sometimes, he would seek to capture ideas about a proposed poem in a drawing first. Under one of his drawings (now kept in the British Museum) with the caption 'Corpses playing hide and seek', there is a note by Douglas: 'sketches and ideas for a poem'. As Blunden noted, Douglas 'hated decoration without anything behind it, but his verse is decorative, and, thinking of it, I think of figureheads and lamias, or of the masks which he devised so eagerly; yet it was his real aim in pleasing the imagination thus to impress truths of human affairs which he came at in his independent way'.<sup>8</sup>

Besides his artistic activities, he took a keen interest in the literary life at Oxford. He published his writings in *Cherwell*, of which he soon became an editor. He was also one of the editors of *Augury* (1940), an Oxford miscellany of prose and verse. Douglas contributed to it a few poems, and a statement 'On the Nature of Poetry'. There is nothing startlingly original about his ideas on poetry, but

\*See Desmond Graham, *Keith Douglas 1920-1944, A Biography*, 1974.

what is striking is that the statement reflects an individual and independent poetic personality which values simplicity, sincerity, stylistic discipline, and above all actual achievement in poetry.

In its nature poetry is sincere and simple. Writing which is poetry must say what the writer has himself to say, not what he has observed others to say with effect, nor what he thinks will impress his hearers because it impressed him hearing it. Nor must he waste any more words over it than a mathematician, every word must work for its keep, in prose, blank verse, or rhyme.

And poetry is to be judged not by what the poet has tried to say; only by what he has said.

One can detect in these aphorisms a veiled attack on much of the poetry of his time, which either dwelt on social themes, or was marked by verbal excesses and fuzziness. When Keyes and Meyer edited *Eight Oxford Poets* (1941), which claimed 'little sympathy with the Audenian school of poetry', Douglas also contributed some of his poems to it. In 1943, along with J. C. Hall and Norman Nicholson, he brought out a three-man anthology, called *Selected Poems*, in which nineteen of his own poems appeared, some of which had already been published in journals and anthologies, including *The Best Poems of 1939* and *Poetry London*.

The other side of Douglas's personality, which craved for physical stimulation and outdoor sports, made him join the O.T.C. at Oxford, and that in turn rendered him liable for active service when war broke out. However, he was not called up immediately, so he spent the year 1939-40 at Oxford. Once called up, he went to various places in England for military training. He had his first posting in the Middle East in June 1941. He was transferred to the Notts. Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry, but was seconded to a staff job in the base. Since he did not like the life of inaction, where he did nothing but waste 'government petrol and money',<sup>9</sup> he ran away to his regiment which was then in the desert, and fought in a Crusader tank from Alamein to Wadi Zem Zem. He kept a notebook account of the North African Campaign, which was subsequently published as *Alamein to Zem Zem*, one of the most impressive prose accounts of the Second World War, comparable to the First World War masterpieces like *Goodbye to All That* and *Undertones of War*. Douglas returned to England from the Middle East before Christmas 1943 for preparations for

'D-Day'. On his third day in Normandy, on 9 June 1944, he was killed at the age of twenty-four.

During the period between his return from the Middle East and his departure for France, Douglas had plans of collecting his poems and publishing them under the title *Bete Noire*, but unfortunately he did not live to execute his plans. Some of his poems of the war years—poems which he wrote on 'airgraphs, on captured Italian note-paper of the Governo Generale della Libia on which he would insert humorous captions in Italian'<sup>10</sup>—had appeared in Tambimuttu's *Poetry London*, and Spencer and Durrell's Cairo publication, *Personal Landscape*. And though sixteen of his best poems had appeared at the end of *Alamein to Zem Zem* (1946)—and the poems in particular received enthusiastic praise in at least two reviews<sup>11</sup>—it was not until 1951 that Editions Poetry London published Douglas's *Collected Poems*, under the joint editorship of John Waller and G. S. Fraser. It did not find wide favour with critics (though Ronald Bottrall wrote a very favourable review in the *New Statesman*) and the public, and soon went out of print. Douglas remained virtually neglected until 1964, when Ted Hughes brought out an edition of Douglas's *Selected Poems*. In 1966, Faber and Faber published the definitive edition of Keith Douglas's *Collected Poems* under the editorship of John Waller, G. S. Fraser and J. C. Hall, and a new edition of *Alamein to Zem Zem*, also under the joint supervision of the three editors mentioned above. Subsequently (1969), Penguin Books published a paperback edition of *Alamein to Zem Zem* in their Penguin Modern Classics series.

Douglas's latest editors have divided his poems into different sections in chronological order, and it is significant that, though his later poems show a greater maturity in his vision and technique, his early poems clearly anticipate the poet of the later years. His earlier poems foreshadow the subtle irony and detachment, coupled with the passionate attempt to explore the mysteries of Love, Time and Death, which were to achieve extraordinarily mature expression in his later poems. It is true that during the year 1943-44, he created poems out of his actual war experiences, but in the majority of these poems the fundamental preoccupations remain the same as in his earlier poems. In other words, his war experiences did not alter his poetic vision, rather, they gave a sharper edge to his thoughts and emotions. It is Brian Gardner's failure to appreciate this subtle treatment of the war theme, and his harking back to the practices of the poets

of the First World War, that can explain his misleading distinction between Douglas's 'more ambitious, philosophic and difficult "base area" poems' and 'the easier but powerful poems of the front line'.<sup>12</sup> G. S. Fraser was better inspired when he remarked that though the poem *Bete Noire* was a failure, it was in its light, 'or against its darkness, (that) all Douglas's other poems must be read'.<sup>13</sup>

In that poem, as well as the 'notes' that Douglas appended to it, he spoke of the indefinable 'black beast', which had haunted him all his life, and which he had neither been able to shake off, nor come to terms with. The 'beast' is obviously open to Freudian and Jungian interpretations as the Death-wish or the Shadow. But in the poems, its influence can be best seen in the poet's obsession with the theme of decay and death, and the mystery and misery of human existence. The man who emerges out of Douglas's poems has a profound consciousness of the tragedy of the human predicament, even though he could write an occasional poem of happiness like 'Villanelle of Spring Bells'. To borrow the words of Ted Hughes, 'the murderous skeleton in the body of a girl, the dead men being eaten by dogs on the moonlit desert, the dead man behind the mirror, these items of circumstantial evidence are steadily out-arguing all his high spirits and hopefulness'.<sup>14</sup>

It is tempting to link Douglas's melancholy with that of his generation which, in Alex Comfort's well-known words, 'grew up in almost complete certainty that we should be killed in action'. But then, one may also suggest that the circumstances of his early life (his father, it may be recalled, left him and his mother when he was eight) can explain the strain of sadness in his personality. The truth would seem to lie, not in outward circumstances so much as in the poet's own temperament. Just as in the case of Houseman—who, incidentally, is one of the poets that the reader of Douglas's early poems thinks of—the sense of melancholy was essentially temperamental, Douglas also gives a similar impression. As an intelligent and sensitive poet, he seemed to have been struck by the way hopes inevitably turn to disillusion, success into emptiness, happiness into sadness. As a fifteen-year old boy, he realised that all the achievements and exploits of 'famous men' are reduced by death to nothingness, so that they:

like plates lie deep  
licked clean their skulls,



rest beautifully, staring.

(‘Famous Men’)

In ‘Dejection’, which Grigson had accepted for inclusion in *New Verse*, death is the subject, and young Douglas tries to accept its inevitability with some kind of hope, however vague. In the first place, there is the recognition that

Death is the season and we the living  
Are hailed by the solitary to join their regiment,  
To leave the sea and the horses and march away  
Endlessly.

But it is followed by a faint ray of hope, with which the poem concludes:

Only tomorrow like a seagull hovers and calls  
Shrieks through the mist and scatters the pool of stars.  
The windows will be open and hearts behind them.

The hope expressed in the last line is effectively undercut by the image of the seagull shrieking and scattering ‘the pool of stars’ in order to emphasise the limited nature of optimism that is possible in life.

The themes of death and decay are linked with his concept of Time, according to which life is moving inexorably, and swiftly, to its tragic end. ‘On Leaving School’ deals with the idea that Time allows little respite to a person, and that carefree, happy school days would soon be over. One’s life is thus constantly exposed to the ravages of Time:

One of us will be the kettle past care of tinkers,  
Rejected, one the tip-top apple, the winking  
Sun’s friend. It will be that way, and Time on our ground  
Will sweep like a maid, and where we were be clean.

Admittedly, in such lines, the language and rhythm of colloquial speech are pretty much Auden’s. Not only Auden, but Dylan Thomas, Eliot and even the poets of the nineties seem to lend Douglas expressions and images like ‘afternoon’s blue drowsiness’, ‘cool tones’, ‘glints of pearly laughter’, ‘soothing his pale hair/with automatic

ecstasy', and 'the winking/Sun's friend'. But one must remember that these poems were written by him before he had reached the age of eighteen. Besides, even in these early poems, one can occasionally notice a certain bluntness and frank honesty, both in thought and technique. Four years before the war started, as a young boy of fifteen, he had foreknowledge of what it involved:

Through a machine gun's sights  
I saw men curse, weep, cough, sprawl in their entrails.

(.303)

And poems like 'Encounter with a God' and 'Famous Men' show not only attempts at linguistic compactness, but also the ability to use simple and striking words that are refreshing and original both in rhythm and impact. Douglas had sent his poems to T. S. Eliot, who was struck by his 'very accomplished juvenilia', and felt that the poems were 'extremely promising'.<sup>15</sup>

What was missing in these poems was the authenticity of actual human experiences. His going to Oxford in 1938 did not immediately result in his acquiring such experiences, but he found the atmosphere there congenial to his poetic development. In the first place, young poets like Michael Meyer, John Heath-Stubbs and John Waller were his contemporaries at Oxford, and all of them were, in their own way, enthusiastic experimenters with poetry. When the editors of *Augury* (1940)—one of whom was Douglas himself—pointed out that the poets in the Miscellany surveyed 'the world as placidly as one should who looks out from such an ancient standpoint as this university. The emotions expressed are as a rule about more ordinary and permanent things than the situation this year (1940)', we get a clue to Douglas's own poetic practices. Similarly, Sidney Keyes's assertion (as one of the editors of *Eight Oxford Poets*) that 'we have, on the whole, little sympathy with the Audenian school of poetry', indicates, if nothing else, at least the desire on the part of these young English poets to write differently. Unlike the poets of the thirties, Douglas was not concerned with social or political themes. Nor was he in full sympathy with the excessive verbal luxuriance and the irrationality of the less-gifted 'neo-romantics' of the late thirties. But he *was* a romantic in so far as he evinced an independent spirit that reacted subjectively to more permanent and elemental themes. And in his

case, these had been the themes of Death and Time. But another theme entered now, the theme of love and, as it turned out, frustrated love. Douglas made friends at Oxford, many of them women. He celebrated the beauty of four of his lady friends in a fragment called 'To Kristin, Yengcheng, Olga, Milena'. And in 'Stranger', he wrote of his love passionately, and in a manner which is reminiscent of Donne:

You are the whole continent of love  
For me, the windy sailor on this ocean,  
Who'd lose his ragged vessel to the waves  
And call on you, the strange land, to save.  
Here I set up my altar and devotion,  
But let no storm blot out the place I have.

But the tendency which made him penetrate into the essential realities of things, and brought him the realisation that the happiness of boyhood would soon be replaced by the harsher experiences of adult life, compelled Douglas to probe into the darker realities of love. 'Leukothæa' is a poem in which the poet's romantic hope that the seemingly supernatural beauty of the girl is incorruptible is rudely shattered by a bad dream:

I trusted the ground.  
I knew the worm and the beetle would go by  
and never dare batten on your beauty.

Last night I dreamed and found my trust betrayed  
Only the light bones and the great bones disarrayed.

The poem, apparently, has deeper implications too, connected with the frustrations of man's higher aspirations and visions.

The important point to note about Douglas's 'Oxford' poems is that he is extending his range, and manipulating his material with greater skill and sophistication. When in 'Soissons' he explains that stones yield both gargoyles and cathedrals, he makes a departure from the unbroken elegiac strain of his 'Schooldays' poems. While in those earlier poems he saw Time dragging hopes to disillusion, happiness to pain, he now expects the cycle to move from pain to pleasure. In a poem like 'An Exercise Against Impatience', there is a determined

effort to find positive significance in living. The opening stanza evokes the atmosphere of a difficult time, with images of silent bells, and leaning buildings which 'exchange an austere opinion of foreboding'. But a look around convinces him that everything in nature is renewed and refreshed after initial onslaughts. In the like manner, mankind too will finally be able to assert the forces of good:

Even, we will command and wield  
good forces. And if we die? And if we die  
those we have met or heard of will not be cold,  
they are as suitable as you or I.

And without prophets, what is there  
in the crucible, the inscrutable cavern,  
and what all the signs have given,  
you can be certain will reappear.

This poem was written in 1940, so that the 'difficult time' can be directly related to the fact of the war. Douglas was still in Oxford, and had not, as yet, undergone actual war experiences, but already one can see a poetic mind that is intelligently aware of the terrible realities, and yet is robust with hope. This, as well as a few other poems that he wrote in Oxford, foreshadow the kind of war poems that he was to write after his own war experiences. In the poem 'Stars', he sees the stars in military terms. They are 'marching in extended orders' on 'a vast field', and what the poet admires in them is their sense of discipline and order:

nothing but discipline  
Has mobilized and still maintains them. Thus  
Time and his ancestors have seen them. Thus  
Always to fight disorder is their business,  
And victory continues in their hand.

And he pays the same kind of ambiguous tribute to John Anderson (an Oxford scholar turned soldier) that he was to pay to the 'obsolescent breed of heroes' in 'Aristocrats' later on:

But I think, the last moment of his gaze  
beheld the father of gods and men,  
Zeus, leaning from heaven as he dies,

whom in his swoon he hears again  
 summon Apollo in the Homeric tongue:  
 Descend Phoebus and cleanse the stain  
 of dark blood from the body of John Anderson.

(‘John Anderson’)

On the other hand, his poem about Russian soldiers frozen to death—

How silly that soldier is pointing his gun at the woods:  
 he doesn’t know it isn’t any good—

(‘Russians’)

prepares us for the detached, and sometimes clinically dispassionate, attitude towards war casualties (especially on the enemy side) of his later poems.

On the whole, however, his poems of university days are a product of an accomplished young man, who was not hindered by the painful realities of actual human experience, and who could ‘survey the world as placidly as one should who looks out from such an ancient standpoint as this university’.

The last poem in the ‘Oxford’ section is full of buoyant hope, which is expressed in appropriately singing rhythm, and through images of spring, dance and wine:

Songs will appear like flowers, they’ll sing and sing  
 and everywhere as it used to be, permanent spring  
 for which their town was known, will fly and dance  
 on the soft air, the food and wine flow  
 from all the fertile outskirts, plenty, plenty  
 for the poor and the rich, plenty for the admirers,  
 the visitors and those travelling through.

(‘An Oration’)

These early poems are significant in that they show the poet’s attempt to bring both joy and pain within the orbit of his poetic experience. Thus, by avoiding naive optimism on the one hand, and the morbid brooding of adolescence on the other, he was prepared to react to adult experience with a sense of balance and perspective. But once he left the university and entered life, as it were, the separation from

his loved ones and familiar preoccupations hit him hard. At the same time, the prospect of his own death became a burning reality, and the 'black beast' on his back suddenly assumed its hideous and true shape. His experiences seemed to threaten his instinctive feeling that life had to be lived. But he was determined that the 'black beast' would not interfere with his living on the material plane, and he tried to come to terms with it in his poetry.

Perhaps we can understand Douglas's poetry better if we realise that the poet and the public man were separate in him. While he emerges as a profoundly pensive young man from his poems, he was, from all accounts, in his outward impact an adventurous, energetic, almost a gay personality. Edmund Blunden spoke of Douglas's 'generosity and zest for life',<sup>16</sup> and Lawrence Durrell remarked that 'Douglas took things as they were, exacting every ounce of experience from them.... Everything was enjoyable, even fear, horror and physical discomfort.'<sup>17</sup> And Douglas's mother had this to say about her son:

The truth was (that) he had unbounded energy and perseverance in anything he considered really worthwhile. He was keen on rugby and swimming, on riding, on dancing and acting. He was interested in people....<sup>18</sup>

But beneath this exuberant, vibrant exterior lay the tragic poet. In *Alamein to Zem Zem* (1966), he himself speaks of these two selves in him:

I lay down to sleep in my clothes, covered with my British warm and blankets, for the nights were already beginning to be cold. Perhaps betrayed by the spectacle of the stars as clear as jewels on black velvet into a mood of more solemnity, I suddenly found myself assuming that I was going to die tomorrow. For perhaps a quarter of an hour I considered to what possibilities of suffering, more than of death, I had laid myself open. This with the dramatic and emotional part of me: but my sense of proportion and humour, like two court jesters, chased away the tragic poet, and I drifted away on the tide of odd thoughts, watching the various signs of battle in the lower sky. (p. 25)

In other words, Douglas faced the day-to-day world with his senses of 'proportion and humour', and the darker problems of human

existence—which formed the subject-matter for his poetry—with that part of his personality which was tormented by the ‘black beast’. Further, I suggest that it was this division in himself that enabled him to contemplate, during his time in active service, Time, Death, etc., with metaphysical dispassionateness. His unhappy experiences enriched his poetic mind, without paralysing his life. It is not insignificant that he uses the phrase ‘*dramatic* and emotional’, because it is the quality of negative capability that imparts to his poems a remarkable objectivity and solid intellectual depth, though, it has to be admitted, it also takes away from them the kind of warmth and humanity that we associate with, say, the poems of Wilfred Owen or Alun Lewis.

The few poems that Douglas wrote during the period of his military training in England, show an increasing mastery of style and depth of experience. The very first poem of this time is a love poem, in which love is sensuous and passionate as well as tragic. The intensity of passion is balanced by a recognition of the weakness of the flesh and the power of death. The poem is called ‘The Prisoner’, and Douglas builds up, with a firm control over language and imagery, a picture of love and beauty, which is at once tender and sensuous without the banality of conventional sentimentality:

but mothwise my hands return  
to your fair cheek, as luminous  
as a lamp in a paper house,  
and touch, to teach love and learn.

But soon the weight of death is felt, and the poet yields to it, not helplessly but with a passionate desire to free the imprisoned spirit from the flesh:

There was the urge  
to break the bright flesh and emerge  
of the ambitious cruel bone.

One of the most impressive poems in this section (‘Army: England’) is ‘Simplify Me When I’m Dead’ in which the poet traces in the simplest, yet most effective, language and rhythm the way death strips man of all his pretensions and worldly glories. His schoolboy poem on this theme was ‘Famous Men’, but in the present poem he foresuffers his own death, and ‘places’ his own successes and

achievements in the wider context of life and death. The tragic course is charted, beginning with birth,

when hairless I came howling in  
as the moon entered the cold sky,

and ending with death. Time's 'telescope' alone can reveal his real and lasting qualities:

Time's wrong-way telescope will show  
a minute man some ten years hence  
and by distance simplified.

Through that lens see if I seem  
substance or nothing. . . .

Remember me when I am dead  
and simplify when I'm dead.

Ted Hughes rightly singles this poem out for its stylistic excellence:

Here he has invented a style that seems able to deal poetically with whatever it comes up against. It is not an exalted verbal activity to be attained for short periods, through abstinence, or a submerged dream treasure to be fished up when the everyday brain is half drugged. It is the language for the whole mind, at its most wakeful, and in all situations.<sup>19</sup>

It is remarkable how quickly Douglas got rid of his earlier habit of using fairyland imagery and secondhand diction. He seems to have aimed all along at the right words which, within the context, are powerful for their stark simplicity and unbending honesty.

Time, inevitably, was another theme on which he wrote some very good poems during this period of military training. To him Oxford was like the Grecian Urn, something stable and permanent. It may be recalled that Oxford was singularly untouched by war. It was never bombed, and young poets like Douglas, Keyes and Allison seem to have made the most of their time there, without worrying too much about the war or the possibility of their own participation in it. Their hectic and intense literary and cultural activities are a



proof of it. No wonder then that Douglas should see Oxford as 'venerated and spared by ominous hours', a place where the students and dons seem to be happily preoccupied with their respective pursuits and callings:

This then is the city of young men; of beginning,  
 ideas, trials, pardonable follies,  
 the lightness, seriousness and sorrow of youth.  
 And the city of the old, looking for truth,  
 browsing for years, the mind's seven  
 bellies filled, become legendary figures, seeming  
 stones of the city, her venerable towers.

These were magical years when Time did not appear to move. But he knew that the reality was that Time destroyed everything it made. 'Time Eating' deals with this subject, and it is one of the most perfect and finished poems that Douglas ever wrote. Here he deals with a theme that has been the subject of philosophers since time immemorial, but he puts his individual stamp on it. What is perhaps most impressive is the ingenuity with which he executes the poem. With a 'metaphysical wit', as Fraser<sup>20</sup> notes, Douglas indicates his huge concept of time:

That volatile huge intestine holds  
 material and abstract in its folds:  
 thought and ambition melt and even the world  
 will alter, in that catholic belly curled.

Though Time destroys and remakes the various objects of nature, paradoxically enough it can bring back neither the poet's youth nor his love. In this paradox lies the agony of the individual human self, and perhaps his triumph, because both youth and love, in a sense, transcend Time. Time's recreative capability is confined to 'the lizard's tail' and 'the bright snakeskin'. It 'cannot, cannot', remake the poet's youth or love:

But Time, who are my love, you cannot make  
 such another; you who can remake  
 the lizard's tail and the bright snakeskin  
 cannot, cannot. That you gobbled in

too quick, and though you brought me from a boy  
you can make no more of me, only destroy.

Thus, even before he experienced actual warfare, Douglas had to his credit a body of poetry which was not imitative juvenilia but was, as Eliot had noted, 'promising'. And the promise lay in the consistency of themes, a growing maturity of outlook on life, and, above all, in sophistication and originality in the use of language and poetic technique. Even a casual comparison with Owen's pseudo-romantic poems of the pre-war years will show how much more distinguished Douglas's poetic beginnings were. After he completed his military training and received his commission, Douglas was selected for special duties with the Indian Army. The Indian plan was cancelled for some reason, and he went instead to the Middle East. He fought in the desert war for more than two years, except for a short period in hospital in Palestine for treatment of injuries received from a mine explosion. When he went to the war, he faced its circumstances with his senses of 'proportion and humour'. He excitedly took part in the war and saw it as an 'important test which I was interested in passing'.<sup>21</sup> But 'the dramatic and emotional part' of him also remained intensely active, and the two parts complemented each other. This was the point that Lawrence Durrell made when he observed:

In all this dust and confusion Douglas found a way of life which was much to his liking, and to which he brought a tough yeoman skill; moreover in some curious way he remained curiously individual inside. I mean that the poet was also present in this world, he was not relegated to the attic. He partook of the soldier and became an appropriate part of him.<sup>22</sup>

This attitude helped Douglas both in his life and poetry. While he was prevented from becoming hysterical about the horrors of war on the one hand, he was able to see them more objectively in terms of the tragic human condition, on the other. Geoffrey Hill misses this central point about Douglas's artistic mind when he advances the opinion 'that the theme of much of Douglas's prose, as well as of his verse, is the sense of the unique and alien existence of man destined for, or engaged in, battle'.<sup>23</sup> To be sure, his battle experiences in a strange country were 'unique' and 'alien', but his poetry, growing out of such experiences, constantly tries to see them in relation to

human experiences in general. The two 'Syria' poems brilliantly illustrate this point. In the first poem Syria is seen as hostile to outsiders, and as a land of concealed treacheries that lurk beneath alluring smiles and 'velvet beauty'. But in the second poem (which is most likely a revised version of the original poem) the poet begins by presenting the coexistence of good and evil, angel and devil, through primeval symbols like the apple and the snake, and goes on to see this phenomenon in that country only as a reflection of a much older, and general, truth. More significantly, he realises that the natives and the allied soldiers are not 'strangers and foreigners' to one another so much as common victims of some inexorable cosmic laws. For, after all, although they had the best of intentions, the soldiers had to indulge in killing and massacre:

Curiously  
though foreigners we surely shall  
prove this background's complement,  
the kindly visitors who meant  
so well all winter but at last fell  
unaccountably to killing in the spring.

Similarly, in 'I Listen to the Desert Wind', his personal emotion of love is crystallised through a foreign landscape. Separated as he was from his sweetheart, he addresses the poem to her, beginning:

I listen to the desert wind  
that will not blow her from my mind.

The poem was originally entitled 'Milena', and it is not a nostalgic poem about separated lovers in the manner of so many war poems of this period. Out in the desert, he is agonised not so much by the fact of separation as by his consciousness that she cannot give him her love as she used to do in former times. This feeling gets an edge from the desolate scene around him, and each seems to complement the other. The images taken from the desert heighten his emotions, and the loss of love assumes 'elemental' proportions:

skims like a bird my sleepless eye  
the sands who at this hour deny  
the violent heat they have by day  
as she denies her former way:

all the elements agree  
with her, to have no sympathy  
for my tactless misery  
as wonderful and hard as she.

And the last stanza brings home to him the tragic nature of love:

O turn in the dark bed again  
and give to him what once was mine  
and I'll turn as you turn  
and kiss my swarthy mistress pain.

Douglas had expressed this kind of realisation in some of his early poems too, but here the stark simplicity of the language, and the whole context out of which this realisation is achieved, create a sense of authenticity and depth.

In all such poems one can find indirect traces of Douglas's *bête noire* obsession 'Devils' deals specifically with this obsession. His mind's apparent silence is deceptive, because it is in fact tormented by an 'idiot crew'. This turbulence is present in the outer world also, and it is rendered in terms of images of flying clouds and black winds:

Outside the usual crowd of devils  
are flying in the clouds, are running  
on the earth, imperceptibly spinning  
through the black air alive with evils  
and turning, diving in the wind's channels.

There is a case for suggesting that such a picture of violence and disorder can be related to the war-time conditions during which Douglas wrote the poem. But, surely, it is more than that: it is an attempt to present the universal pervasion of evil. To miss this point and see it purely in topical terms would be to limit the poem's significance and deny its artistic breadth of vision. It would be as wrong to do that as to suggest that when Yeats spoke of 'mere anarchy loosed upon the world' (in 'The Second Coming'), he was only referring to the holocaust caused by the First World War. Here, indeed, lies Douglas's triumph as a war poet. When he said to J.C. Hall in 1943 that so far he had 'not tried to write about war',<sup>24</sup> he obviously meant the kind of war poetry which Owen and Sassoon had

made famous. He did not write propagandist war poetry, but war entered his poetic experience as a symbol of life's pain and frustrations. In the poem 'The Offensive', Douglas thus lifts the war theme on to a universal level, and views it in cosmic terms:

When you are dead and the harm done  
 the orators and clerks go on  
 the rulers of interims and wars  
 effete and stable as stars....  
 The sun goes round and the stars go round  
 the nature of eternity is circular  
 and man must spend his life to find  
 all our successes and failures are similar.

But there is a definite reason why Douglas is regarded as a 'war poet' whereas Yeats is not, and it has something to do with the former's career in the army. Yeats's detractors on this matter are right on one factual point, namely, that he was never personally involved in the First World War, and that, as an Irishman fighting for independence, he had perhaps little sympathy with the English cause. In the case of Douglas, on the other hand, war formed the background against which he realised his deepest human experiences, of which his poems are a moving record.

In that letter to J.C. Hall, in which Douglas had said that he had never written about war, he had gone on to say that from then on he would. He had also indicated his attitude towards the war:

To be sentimental or emotional now is dangerous to oneself and to others. To trust anyone or to admit any hope of a better world is criminally foolish, as foolish as it is to stop working for it. It sounds silly to say work without hope, but it can be done; it's only a form of insurance; it doesn't mean work hopelessly.<sup>25</sup>

This is a much more mature acceptance of the essential realities of the human condition than Owen's attitude, summed up in: 'All a poet can do today is warn.' Among the Douglas manuscripts in the British Museum, there are a few pages on which he had jotted down some observations under the title 'Poets in this War'. They were reproduced in the TLS, 23 April 1971. They are fragmentary in nature, but some of his thoughts are important in so far as he tries to explain why there is

no war poetry comparable to that produced during the earlier War. He attempts to find reasons for the modern poet's silence on the specific subject of war

They do not write because there is nothing new, from a soldier's point of view, about this war, except its mobile character. These are two reasons: hell cannot be let loose twice. it was let loose in the Great War and it is the same old hell now. The hardships, pain and boredom; the behaviour of the living and the appearance of the dead were so accurately described by the poets of the Great War that everyday on the battlefields of the western desert—and no doubt on the Russian battlefields as well—their poems are illustrated. Almost all that a modern poet on active service would be inspired to write would be tautological.

This is more a statement about what war poetry in his time was not, or rather could not be, than his own ideas about what it should be. Perhaps Douglas never had, and understandably so, any theory about the relationship between war and poetry. It was merely by writing poetry as he always wanted to do, even through his war experiences, that he established a new relationship between the Muse and Mars.

Douglas entered war with the conviction that though war could excite 'financiers and parliamentarians', it could not 'excite a poet or a painter'.<sup>26</sup> But as a man he was enough of a realist to see himself condemned to figure in, and observe, it. While he could never work up a patriotic enthusiasm for it, he accepted it in a matter-of-fact manner, without becoming over-wrought. He tells how he and his friends tried to convince a young infantry officer who was 'nervous and afraid he might disgrace himself in his first battle', that 'he would probably neither disgrace nor distinguish himself, but simply enter the battle and emerge again, having done his job'.<sup>27</sup> Douglas himself obviously participated in the war with some such spirit. However, his naturally passionate mind looked for thrills and excitement wherever he could find them, and his *Alanwin to Zen Zen* shows that once he was in the battlefield, he reacted more easily to fear and exhilaration than the deeper issues of war.

The turret was full of fumes and smoke. I coughed and sweated; fear had given place to exhilaration. Twilight increased to

near-darkness, and the air all round us gleamed with the different coloured traces of shells and bullets, brilliant and graceful curves travelling from us to the enemy and from him towards us. The din was tremendously exciting. I could see a trail of machine-gun bullets from one of our heavy tanks passing a few yards to the left of my tank, on a level with my head. Above us whistled the shells of the seventy-fives. Overhead the trace of enemy shells could be seen mounting to the top of their flight where, as the shell tilted towards us, it disappeared. Red and orange bursts leapt up beside and in front of us.<sup>28</sup>

Amid this kind of colour and excitement, the only human relationship that he recognised was one of comradeship with his fellow soldiers. He recreated the mood of heroism in what would now appear as an anachronistic poem, 'Aristocrats'. But he was instinctively drawn towards aristocratic morality and heroism:

The plains were their cricket pitch  
and in the mountains the tremendous drop fences  
brought down some of the runners. Here then  
under the stones and earth they dispose themselves,  
I think with their famous unconcern.  
It is not gunfire I hear but a hunting horn.

At the same time, he also realised that these men with their 'stupidity and chivalry' were the 'obsolescent breed of heroes'. (Douglas had changed the title of the poem from 'Sportsmen' to 'Aristocrats' perhaps to emphasise this point). In another poem — 'The Trumpet' — which follows 'Aristocrats' almost immediately, the trumpet which had led men to cry that 'war is sweet' is seen as a 'liar'. It is a 'liar' because a 'flight of bullets' has exposed the hollowness of its notes:

But, as the apprehensive ear rejoiced  
breathing the notes in, the sky glistened  
with a flight of bullets....

In the poems discussed in the preceding paragraph, Douglas's preconceived or inherited ideas about aristocratic morality and chivalry are subjected to unbearable strain, if not entirely invalidated, by his

own experiences of battles. But in a great many other poems his experiences help to sharpen and precisely define his ideas. This is not to suggest that he had some ready-made theories which he was trying to foist on his war experiences. Far from it. The 'black beast' remained indefinable to the last, but he was agonisingly aware of its haunting presence. In poem after poem, through images and metaphors that are constantly repeated, and through his prose and painting, he sought to capture its shape, reality and impact. His war experiences helped him in such explorations in the sense that the human tragedy caused by war's senseless atrocities seemed to be gradually defining its nature for him. In a poem like 'Cairo Jag', he depicts the squalor of civilian and military life, only to emphasise their sameness. There is Marcelle, with her dull, dead lover's photograph and letters, shrieking in Arabic with the cabman about the fare, and there are legless beggars in 'the streets dedicated to sleep/stenches and sour smells'. Then comes a description of a battlefield:

But by a day's travelling you reach a new world  
 the vegetation is of iron  
 dead tanks, gun barrels split like celery  
 the metal brambles have no flowers or berries  
 and there are all sorts of manure, you can imagine  
 the dead themselves, their boots, and possessions  
 clinging to the ground, a man with no head  
 has a packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli.

This seemingly 'new world' is, in fact, not different from the civilian life described earlier in the poem. The idea behind the accumulation of diverse descriptions of civilian life and the military front is to show their essential similarity—'it is all one, all as you have heard'. Fraser explains it in greater detail: '...moral death and disorder match physical death and disorder; Marcelle's photographs and letters exactly match the dead soldier's packet of chocolate and souvenir of Tripoli, are as futile, and pathetic and meaningless, and ultimately enraging.'<sup>29</sup>

The attempt to relate the alien experiences of a 'new world' is difficult at the best of times, but in the case of a war poet it became more so because of his personal involvement in these traumatic experiences. The danger was that he might become hopelessly sentimental or uncontrollably enraged or pathetically self-pitying in his passive suffering. Douglas was able to avoid these risks because of



his strong, individual personality. Physically he had the capacity to enjoy the 'adventure' of war, and mentally his rational compunctions and ironic self-detachment enabled him to see the new experiences from a wider human perspective. For example, the superior officers were the targets of scathing criticism in the hands of the poets of the First World War, but in his poem 'Gallantry', Douglas does not fail to see that his colonel, despite his pompousness and arrogance, is human with faults like the other soldiers in the regiment. The colonel of the poem is faintly reminiscent of Sassoon's General, and more particularly of Douglas's own Piccadilly Jim, with whom he was in constant touch over the wireless during the desert war:

The colonel, beautifully dressed and with his habitual indolence of hand, returned my salute from inside the fifteen-hundredweight, where he was sitting with Graham, the adjutant, a handsome, red-haired, amiable young Etonian. I said to Piccadilly Jim (the colonel), 'Good evening, Sir, I've escaped from Division for the moment, so I wondered if I'd be of any use to you up here.' 'Well, Peter', stroking his moustache and looking like a contented ginger cat, 'we're *most* glad to see you-er-as always. All the officers in 'A' squadron, except Andrew, are casualties, so I'm sure he'll welcome you with open arms.'<sup>80</sup>

But even though Piccadilly Jim was, on occasions, nasty and downright insulting to him, Douglas greatly regretted his death, and paid rich tributes to him as an officer 'of whom we could be proud'.<sup>81</sup>

In the poem, the colonel's jokes spoken in 'a casual voice' which fell into 'the ears of a doomed race', make a grim and antithetical introduction. And although the brutalities of war are brilliantly expressed through contrasting images—e.g., there was the boy whose 'perfectly mannered flesh fell' when he was struck by a shell on opening the door, which he did 'as he had learnt to do at school', or the description of how a soldier's 'silken intentions' during the ensuing spring were 'severed with a single splinter'—Douglas soon cramps our response by under-statement and irony:

It was a brave thing the colonel said,  
but the whole sky turned too hot  
and the three heroes never heard what  
it was, gone deaf with steel and lead.

But the bullets cried with laughter,  
 the shells were overcome with mirth,  
 plunging their heads in steel and earth—  
 (the air commented in a whisper).

He is not concerned with evoking pity so much as the irony of the situation. The men, as well as the colonel, are doing their respective jobs with good intentions, but they are all common victims of the tragedy that hangs over the 'doomed race'. Further, in the light of the 'laughter' of the bullets and the 'mirth' of the shells, the colonel's attempts at a 'joke' only intensify the sense of irony. So, what the poem is trying to do is not to analyse the validity or otherwise of war, but to find an aspect of human life illustrated in the situation. The poem is also remarkable for its use of direct language and brilliant technique. Apart from the effective employment of antithetical imagery already referred to, the personification in the last stanza of the bullets and shells, which (who?) collide merrily against men, who in turn have been transformed into 'steel and earth', is ingenious. It is a well-organised poem, in which the contrasting elements, ordinary human hopes and the destructiveness of war, have been poetically fused, with the tragedy of war finally overcoming human aspirations.

'Vergissmeinnicht' is a perfect example of war poetry of its kind, in which the poet is able to distance a war incident in which he was personally involved, in order to seize the paradoxes of human life. That poem grew out of a common experience of soldiers in battlefields—the encounter with the dead body of another soldier. Sassoon, it may be recalled, had captured the frightening scene in his poem 'The Rear-Guard':

Savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap,  
 And flashed his beam across the livid face  
 Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore  
 Agony dying hard ten days before.

And Robert Graves was more melodramatic and crude in his presentation of 'a dead Boche' in his poem 'Familiar Letter to Siegfried Sassoon':

Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired  
 Dribbling black blood . . . .

Douglas's poem on a similar subject, on the other hand, is much more sophisticated and distinctive, both in the treatment of the theme and in the technique employed. The sight of corpses that he encountered in the battlefield apparently made a deep impression on him. One of the ways he tried to transform this into art was by drawing pen and ink sketches. Three such sketches (which are lodged in the British Museum) have been reproduced in the various editions of *Alamein to Zem Zem*. As has been remarked elsewhere in this chapter, it was Douglas's practice to draw a sketch of a scene or an incident before writing a poem about it—under one of his drawings, with the caption 'Corpses playing hide and seek', he had added a note saying 'sketches and ideas for a poem'. So, it is reasonable to suppose that the three sketches, each depicting a soldier lying dead, with a burst stomach, twisted legs, agonised expression on the face, and thick black flies settling on congealed dark blood, were the initial attempts to capture the idea that was eventually crystallised in the poem 'Vergissmeinnicht'.

Apart from the various drafts of the poem itself, there are at least three direct prose accounts of a dead soldier. Two of them occur in *Alamein to Zem Zem*, the first one of which is pretty straightforward:

Looking down for a moment at a weapon-pit beside us, I saw a Libyan soldier reclining there. He had no equipment nor arms, and lay on his back as though resting, his arms flung out, one knee bent, his eyes open. . . . As I looked at him, a fly crawled up his cheek and across the dry pupil of his unblinking right eye. I saw that a pocket of dust had collected in the trough of the lower lid. (p.38)

The second description, however, is more emotionally charged, yet highly controlled and balanced:

About two hundred yards from the German derelicts, which were now furiously belching inky smoke, I looked down into the face of a man lying hunched up in a pit. His expression of agony seemed so acute and urgent, his stare so wild and despairing, that for a moment I thought him alive. He was like a cleverly posed waxwork, for his position suggested a paroxysm, an orgasm of pain. He seemed to move and writhe. But he was stiff. The dust which powdered his face like an actor's lay on his wide open eyes, whose stare held my gaze like the Ancient Mariner's. He had tried to cover his

wounds with towels against the flies. His haversack lay open, from which he had taken towels and dressings. His water-bottle lay tilted with the cork out. Towels and haversack were dark with dried blood, darker still with a great concourse of flies. This picture, as they say, told a story. It filled me with useless pity (pp. 50-51)

This description is more complex, and memorable, because it is shot through with insights into the victim's agony as well as the poet's own reaction to it. In the first place, the pain and the despair on the face of the corpse have been rendered with chilling intensity. Douglas then goes on to describe, with the precision of a painter's eye for details and his characteristic imagery taken from the stage, the physical posture of the man. He looked 'a posed waxwork', and the dust 'powdered his face like an actor's'. Far from making the scene disgusting and revolting (as it must have appeared in reality) Douglas distances it by a clever use of adjectives and firm linguistic control. He is thus able to respond to the dead man's fixed gaze, and the precarious balance between life and death that the scene seems to suggest: 'For a moment I thought him alive.' 'He seemed to move and writhe.' But within the context of the narrative, there is no room for further reflection. The scene filled him with 'useless pity'.

The sight of the dead soldier obviously kept on haunting him, and he seems to have constantly tried to wring a lasting significance or meaning out of it. After *Alamein*, he came back to the scene once again in the short story, 'The Little Red Mouth', which was published for the first time in *Stand* (No. 2, 1970). This story centres round the picture of a dead man in the battlefield, but here the writer's response to it is linked with thoughts of beauty and love. Before seeing the corpse he had been reading a French poem celebrating the physical beauty of a girl, especially her lips. He was reminded of his own friend Sylvie, who had asked him: 'Je suis jolie, hein? Dis-moi, j'ai un joli corps?' in the very tone of voice of the poem—'Et la bouche vermeillette'. The words 'et la bouche vermeillette' continued to ring in his ears as he set out on his patrol duty. Then suddenly he came up against the blood-spattered body of a dead soldier. Douglas describes the body in terms almost identical to those he had used in the second passage from *Alamein* quoted above—only now in the short story there seems to be a greater concentration on physical details:

It was like a carefully posed waxwork. He lay propped against one end of the pit, with his neck stretched back, mouth open, dust on his tongue. Eyes open, dulled with dust, and the face, yellowish with dust, a doll's or an effigy's. . . A crowd of flies covered him: there were black congregations of them wherever the patches of blood were and they were crawling on his face in ones and twos . . . . It is not too much to say his position was a cry of pain.

Douglas's chief interest in the story seems to be to convey a sense of horror as he brings the painful descriptions of the dead soldier into violent contrast with the sensual details of a woman's body.

I looked at him, trembling with horror, stunned  
 into involuntary speech, saying over and over  
 again, in an audible whisper:  
     'et la bouche vermeillette'.

But Douglas the poet has been able to treat this theme more subtly in the poem 'Vergissmeinnicht'. In that poem he exploits the irony suggested by the juxtaposition of the images of the red mouth and the dead man, finally to emphasise a paradox of human life. The tragic nature of love and the fierceness of death are themes which run through most of his poems, but in the present poem these two themes have been fused together. In the first stanza, the poet and his comrades return to the scene of a previous battle, which is now sunlit as contrasted to its having been a 'nightmare ground' during the combat:

Three weeks gone and the combatants gone,  
 returning over the nightmare ground  
 we found the place again, and found  
 the soldier sprawling in the sun.

On seeing the corpse of the German soldier the poet almost exults, because he had hit the poet's tank during the battle with a shell which came 'like the entry of a demon'. In the third stanza, he notices in the dead soldier's pocket the 'dishonoured picture' of his sweetheart with the words, 'Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht' ('Forget me not, Steffi') written on it. But he moves on to express satisfaction over the death of the enemy:

We see him almost with content  
 abased, and seeming to have paid  
 and mocked at by his own equipment  
 that's hard and good when he's decayed.

Having thus expressed satisfaction over the death of his enemy, Douglas coolly considers the human implications of the situation in the last two stanzas. He describes, by carefully selecting his adjectives, how the girl would 'weep' to see her dead lover on whose skin 'swart' flies move, and on whose 'paper eye' dust has settled. G. S. Fraser<sup>32</sup> has demonstrated how by thus distancing the scene Douglas has saved it from becoming revolting—Keats might have called it an instance of the evaporation of 'disagreeables' for seizing the tragic truth. Though Douglas can be said to have what in army parlance might be called, 'a healthy hatred of the enemy', he is also able to see the German as a person rather than a mere object. He discovers in the predicament of the dead soldier a paradox of human life, and it is contained in the antithesis, between the soldier and the lover, of the last stanza:

For here the lover and killer are mingled  
 who had one body and one heart.  
 And death who had the soldier singled  
 has done the lover mortal hurt.

In another context, this antithesis might have seemed trite, even meaningless. But here, suddenly, the recognition of the lover in the enemy soldier (the 'killer') makes the poet aware of the ironies of life.

However, this is not to say, as R. N. Currey believes, that 'Douglas . . . is reacting with Owen's kind of compassion to the dead enemy who might, but for the grace of God, be Douglas himself, the dead German soldier with a picture of his girl in his pocket'.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, the tendency among some readers of this poem has been to be sentimental about the potential pity in the subject matter, even though Douglas does not exploit it. It is reasonable to suppose that, faced with a similar situation, Owen might have written the kind of poem Currey has in mind. But Douglas's highly individualistic attitudes both as a soldier and a poet produced a poem of urbane sympathy rather than overwhelming pity and fellow-feeling. It is a measure of his artistic excellence and tenacity of purpose that he attacked a

certain incident, which made a deep impression on his mind, from various angles and in different forms, until it yielded a significant and universal vision to him.

In the poem 'Personal Landscape' which was perhaps the last poem he wrote before leaving the Middle East for England, Douglas is inspired to indulge in metaphysical speculations on seeing the dead soldiers lying in battlefields. To begin with, he depicts the scene with Imagistic sharpness combined with a remarkable ability to create visual effects in the manner of Rosenberg:

On scrub and sand the dead men wriggle  
in their dowdy clothes. They are mimes  
who express silence and futile aims  
enacting this prone and motionless struggle  
at a queer angle to the scenery  
crawling on the boards of the stage like walls,  
deaf to the one who opens his mouth and calls  
silently. The decor is terrible tracery  
of iron. The eye and mouth of each figure  
bear the cosmetic blood and hectic  
colours death has the only list of.

But Douglas is not content merely to present a picture of war's terrible destruction with a painter's eye. he is trying to discover some significance in this situation. After giving that brilliant description of the dead soldiers, he sees himself as one of them—'I am the figure writhing on the blackcloth'. Once he has thus been able to distance his own experience he is able to elevate the poem to a metaphysical level, and see his own self in terms of heaven and hell:

Yes,

I am all these and I am the craven  
the remorseful the distressed  
penitent: not passing from life to life,  
but all these angels and devils are driven  
into my mind like beasts. I am possessed,  
the house whose wall contains the dark strife  
the arguments of hell with heaven.

Here he views himself as the prototype of Man, whose mind is the battleground for good and evil and, typically, he uses images of the

stage, especially in the second stanza, and those of angels and devils in the last one, in order to present this cosmic 'drama' of human life. Thus, even though the war brought to him not only terrible but alien experiences, Douglas's poetic mind was able to shape a vision that was at once human and universal. And the experience was not, after all, something entirely new to him. He had all along been haunted, directly or indirectly, by the 'black beast', and in the present poem he is 'possessed' as devils and angels are driven into his mind like 'beasts'.

It is not surprising, then, that on his return to England in 1944, Douglas finds himself sitting in Piccadilly, oppressed by the 'black beast':

This is my particular monster, I know him;  
he walks about inside me: I'm his house  
and his landlord. He's my evacuee  
taking a respite from hell in me...

It is significant that he had planned to call his projected volume of poems, which was never published in his life-time, *Bête Noire*, and that he had drawn a cover for the book. This cover design depicts a horseman, with an anguished expression on his face and a huge, oppressive black beast on his back. He left notes about this proposed poem, in which he remarked: '*Bête Noire* is the name of the poem I can't write: a protracted failure, which is also a protracted success I suppose. *Because it is the poem I begin to write in a lot of other poems:* this is what justifies my use of that title for the book'<sup>34</sup> (italics mine). The only way he could describe the 'black beast' was by drawing it as 'black care', and that seems to fittingly underline the themes of pain, suffering and death in his poems, in which, significantly enough, images of devils, demons, hell, ghosts and shadows occur again and again.

Douglas evidently felt that to carry this kind of burden was the price that he had to pay for his poetic destiny. In one of his earlier poems, 'The Poets', he had described how poets were different from people in general. And in 'The Deceased', the poet is seen, despite his physical and 'moral' decrepitude, as a man of distinctive sensibility: the poet appears to have felt 'a refined pain/to which your virtue cannot attain'. For this quality, Douglas says, people should 'respect him. For in this/he had an excellence you miss.' More specifically, in the fragmentary '*Bête Noire*', he feels that the poet



has the special gift of exploring truths though only at a terrible personal cost:

If at times my eyes are lenses  
through which the brain explores  
constellations of feeling  
my ears yielding like swinging doors  
admit princes to the corridors  
into the mind, do not envy me.  
I have a beast on my back.

He seems to have had an uncanny suspicion that essential truths which could give significance to human life lay beyond man's capacity for ordinary perception and the conventional values of society. Moreover, he believed that death was a gateway to that 'secret' and he would have wholeheartedly agreed with Yeats's belief that 'we begin to live when we have conceived life as a tragedy'.<sup>35</sup> Hence his preoccupation with themes of death and decay. In the last complete poem that he wrote in Egypt, he spoke of that 'secret' and the means of achieving it:

Each time the night discards

draperies on the eyes and leaves the mind awake  
I look each side of the door of sleep  
for the little coin it will take  
to buy the secret I shall not keep.

I see men as trees suffering  
or confound the detail and the horizon.  
Lay the coin on my tongue and I will sing  
of what the others never set eyes on.

(*'Desert Flowers'*)

It is in this sense that Douglas can be described as a 'metaphysical' poet, who ruminated and speculated about eternal themes—'the permanent things', as the expression was in *Augury*—of Time and Death. His best poems show a mature mind, a refined technician, and a master in the use of simple, yet extremely sophisticated, language. The vision that he tries to project is about the tragedy of

the human situation, combined with an intelligent appreciation of that fact. His poetry is a record of his efforts to understand the nature of that tragedy, and his explorations of tragic themes took on an extra edge during those calamitous years of the war. The themes that he had dealt with in 'lyric and abstract form'<sup>36</sup> in his earlier poems find a more authentic and austere expression in his later poems, apparently because his mind quickly matured in the light of his 'palpable' experiences of 'the extraordinary happenings' during the war. But paradoxically enough, the war which facilitated his poetic growth in this sense, also cut it short. His explorations were by no means complete when he died. That is why, in the poem 'On A Return From Egypt', he returns to Europe 'disheartened':

And all my endeavours are unlucky explorers  
come back, abandoning the expedition;  
the specimens, the lilies of ambition  
still spring in their climate, still unpicked:  
but time, time is all I lacked  
to find them, as the great collectors before me.

The poem concludes with the image of the poet crashing through the 'window':

The next month, then, is a window  
and with a crash I'll split the glass.

The image is not dissimilar to the one Douglas had used as a sixteen-year old boy in the poem 'Dejection':

The windows will be open and hearts behind them.

But in that last poems of his brief life, he is more apprehensive, as if war had taught him what could be the ultimate confrontation in life:

Behind it stands one I must kiss,  
person of love or death  
a person or a wraith,  
I fear what I shall find.

In his own case, the confrontation came about too early; he died only a few months after writing these lines—a tragic realisation of a sad permonition.

## FIVE

### *Alun Lewis*

ALUN LEWIS had been traditionally regarded as the greatest poet who perished in the Second World War. His poetry was immediately appealing because it expressed in sensuous and lyrical terms the soldiers' feelings of separation and isolation, and their nostalgia for familiar native scenes and countryside. But a closer scrutiny of Lewis's poems, especially when set against the achievements of other war poets like Keyes and Douglas, would lead one to believe that Lewis had perhaps been over-rated as a poet. Thus, Gordon Symes (himself a minor poet of the Second World War) prefaced his article on Lewis by remarking that, in 'many ways, and not only because of his youth, Keyes was a far more startling phenomenon. I doubt if any one would deny that his intellectual and imaginative resources were deeper than Lewis's.'<sup>1</sup> And we have already seen how Ted Hughes regarded Douglas as not only the greatest poet of the war, but also the most promising poet of his generation. Lewis could write occasional poems of great power and intensity, but had not, before his premature death, developed a consistent theme or themes that he might have explored through his poems. A critic like R.N. Currey<sup>2</sup> can make a plausible case for viewing Lewis as a poet of pity on the lines of Wilfred Owen by tracing the poetry of pity through his feelings for the Welsh miners, the Indian peasants and 'the landless soldiers' of war. But such a critical approach is bound to be inadequate because it fails to take into account Lewis's poetry as a whole, or the tension in it. The tension in his poetry arises out of the fact that though Lewis was a man of deep pity and sympathy, his bewildering war experiences which brought him face to face with terrible realities of life and death challenged his compassionate stance. Apparently, he realised that pity was not enough to deal with those realities. In other words, he discovered that it was difficult to adopt an Owenesque attitude because the tragedy which threatened to consume both the giver and the receiver of pity seemed to be cosmic. While he was in the process of understanding the nature of this overwhelming tragedy, he died suddenly.

He was aware that as a poet he had not developed a consistent vision which could be projected through his poems. As late as 6 December 1943, he had remarked that he had 'a persistent feeling that I'm still waiting for my big moment, my big word. It's still in seed and won't flower till it has a mind to. I can't hurry that up.'<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, he died within a few months of writing those words, and his poetic statement remained incomplete. His attitude to war varied from feelings of apprehension to viewing it as man's confrontation with death, but he seldom gave the impression of a poet who had come to grips with the fundamental and, one might say, the eternal human problems that the war obviously presented before him. Rather, his poems seem to be a record of the life of a man who was hurled from one experience to another, leaving him bewildered and depressed. The poems are, therefore, 'occasional' rather than constellations composing one sky. Some of them are able to catch, and preserve, the intensity of the moment, while the others fail to be anything more than the fleeting reactions and moods of a sensitive man. As a result, the interest of his poems tends to be limited to the fact that they reflect the feelings and thoughts of the poet as he moved from his native Wales to various places in Britain for military training, to his postings in India, and finally to the few weeks of his active service before he was killed in Burma.

Alun Lewis was born on 1 July 1915 at Aberdare in Glamorgan. He had a happy childhood, but was always aware of the poverty and suffering of the Welsh people who lived around him. His grandfather, a farm labourer, had moved from Carmarthenshire to Glamorgan when the pits were opened there, and worked as a miner for fifty years until his death. But Lewis's father started as a schoolmaster, and later on became the Director of Education in Aberdare; one of his uncles became a Professor of Celtic Studies at Aberystwyth, and another a Congregational Minister. This kind of family background enabled Alun Lewis to view the life of miners in South Wales with understanding and sympathy on the one hand, and with a certain detachment on the other.

He first went to Glynhafod School, Aberdare, and then to Cowbridge Grammar School on a scholarship. In the autumn of 1932 he entered the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth to study for an honours degree in History. While at college he was a good student and, according to his tutors, his 'first' was never in doubt. He took active part in sports and extra-curricular activities. He was a member

of the University Hockey Eleven in 1932-1933 when it won the University Championship, and was also interested in the various political and academic societies of the college. He contributed his writings to the college magazine, *The Dragon*, of whose editorial board he became the secretary in 1934-35. There was nothing extraordinary about the poems he wrote at this time. they were facile, conventional and decorative. Some of his short stories, however, showed promise.

He obtained the expected first class degree in 1935 and started to worry about his career. Though the choice seemed to lie between 'the ideal of a writer's life, to be attained by way of journalism, or a career of research and teaching',<sup>4</sup> he chose research, and went to the University of Manchester on a Pickles Research-Studentship. He did not like life in a big industrial city, nor indeed the research that he had undertaken. In a short story, written at this time, he spoke of

work, the diurnal, unmanageable—bending over medieval charters and accounts, transcribing, copying, collating. And all the time trying to make it remote and scientific, this long dead Thirteenth Century . . . .<sup>5</sup>

At one point he was seriously considering giving up the work, but stuck it out on the advice of his supervisor. In 1937, he took an M.A. in Medieval History. Since there was no prospect of a university job, he returned to Aberystwyth for a year's course in teacher training. It was with some difficulty that he was finally able to get a—temporary—position at a school in Pengam, Glamorgan. At this time, threats of war were looming on the horizon, and though he had started by being a pacifist, he soon realised that he must go to the war when it came:

I shall probably join up, I imagine I've been unable to settle the moral issue satisfactorily; when I say I *imagine* I mean I have a deep sort of fatalist feeling that I'll go. Partly because I want to experience life in as many phases as I'm capable of—i.e., I'm more a writer than a moralist, I suppose. But I don't know—I'm not going to kill. Be killed perhaps, instead.<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting that his attitude was similar to that of Owen, who had remarked: 'Be bullied, be outraged, be killed: do not kill.' Anyway, Lewis joined the army as a postal-clerk with the Royal

Engineers early in 1940, and for the next two years he moved from camp to camp in England.

During this period of military training, Lewis had plenty of time to reflect on life as he had known it, and also on army life in general. And this was the time when he wrote most of the poems that appeared in *Raiders' Dawn* (1942), and the short stories which were collected under the title *The Last Inspection* (1942). As a writer, he very much wanted to reach a wide public. With this aim in mind he collaborated with John Petts and Brenda Chamberlain to bring out the 'Caseg Broadsheets'. Brenda Chamberlain wrote an account of the broadsheets (her manuscripts are lodged in the National Library of Wales) in which she remarked:

(Alun Lewis) suggested with immense enthusiasm that the three of us should collaborate in a literary venture of bringing out a cheap series of broadsheets. He seemed to be obsessed with the idea of reaching the people.

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Subsequently, Brenda Chamberlain brought out a book, *Alun Lewis and the Making of the Caseg Broadsheets* (1970), where once again she emphasised Lewis's desire to 'reach the people—with beauty and love', and explained that it was essentially a Welsh venture, and the hope was that the poems would be illustrated with wood cuts and engravings. Lewis's own poems, 'Raiders' Dawn' and 'Songs of Innocence', appeared in the first number in 1941, and Dylan Thomas's 'In Memory of Anne Jones' appeared (in part) in the fifth number. Unfortunately, the venture was a failure, and the series died out after the sixth issue.

In 1942, Lewis was transferred to India Command. He arrived in India later that year, and stayed on in the sub-continent until March 1944 when, while patrolling Mayu Range in the Arakan, he slipped on a stone, and the loaded revolver he was carrying went off, hurting him fatally. From the time of his embarkation for India until his death, he wrote letters regularly to his wife, a teacher of German at a school in Mountain Ash, near Aberdare, whom he had married in 1941. These letters first appeared under the title *Letters From India* in 1946. And these letters, together with six uncollected short stories, were printed under the title *In the Green Tree* in 1948. Apart from these, he had written poems in India, and they were posthumously

published in *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets* (1945), which contained a foreword by Robert Graves.

It is important to note that even though most of Lewis's short stories and poems are directly or indirectly connected with his war experiences, he had launched himself on a poetic career well before 1939. In consultation with Mrs. Gweno Lewis, John Stuart Williams has been able to date Lewis's pre-war poems. According to him, 'more than a third of the poems in *Raiders' Dawn* were written before 1939.<sup>7</sup> The argument seems convincing despite Lewis's own remark in 'Author's Note' to *Raiders' Dawn* that 'practically all these poems have been written since 1939'. In the poems which Williams thinks were written before 1939, the poet deals with subjects that are quite independent of war. But in the absence of 'the stimulus of war', or indeed any deep experience or thought, Lewis's pre-war poems strike the reader as pseudo-romantic and pretty conventional. 'Mid-Winter' evokes a sense of exile, loss and longing with a lavish use of lush diction and imagery. There is also a streak of sensuality in the poem that is not altogether accidental. In his early poems, Lewis gives the impression that some hidden sexual forces within him needed to be released. In 'The Desperate' he specifically speaks of such a need:

O man and woman  
In that hour of need,  
Fling wide the sluice  
Release the seed.

This unfortunately led him to use erotic imagery without much poetic relevance. Thus:

Stars seemed gilded nipples  
Of the Night's vast throbbing breasts,  
Softly disclosing themselves at the fall of dark.

('Songs For the Night')

Reviewers complained that in some of Lewis's poems the theme of love 'often dissolves into depressing sensuality and what is known as "sex" <sup>8</sup>, and Lewis himself later spoke of 'the disturbing sensual vein there that interfered with the poetry of the poem'.<sup>9</sup> His early

love poems are rather weak, primarily because Lewis had not, as yet learnt to control his lyrical impulse, or to curb his fondness for florid imagery and diction. It is for this reason that his 'Songs' strike one as rather sentimental, where grief and death lose their poignancy amidst the lilting music and the romantic imagery of the lines.

His objective poems of this period are more interesting. 'Poems From The Chinese' are a pleasant exercise in the manner of Pound, while 'The Swan's Way' and 'Horace At Twenty' are poems of skilful versification. 'The Odyssey' bears evidence of Lewis's striking historical imagination. The poem has great assuredness and poise, and the poet has been able to create myth and experience which seem historically authentic and yet relevant to contemporary living. The ambivalent feelings of guilt, courage, frustration and a general sense of nostalgia for a peaceful homely life on the part of Odysseus's followers have been captured in lines of dignified blank-verse.

Two other poems of this period—'The Mountain Over Aberdare' and 'The Rhondda'—are of special interest because they grew out of Lewis's personal knowledge of the life of Welsh miners. His fondness for rich adjectives somehow diffuses the focus, and the poems appear to record his attempts at 'poeticising' scenes rather than his concentrated emotional reactions to them. 'The Mountain Over Aberdare' is not a poem of protest; the poet appears only as a compassionate observer of the sad scene. It opens with, 'From this high quarried ledge I see', and ends with:

I watch the clouded years  
Rune the rough foreheads of these moody hills,  
This wet evening, in a lost age.

'The Rhondda', on the other hand, is a poem of protest, and it contains a direct attack on profiteers, who are held responsible for the plight of the 'unwanted colliers' and the 'fat flabby-breasted wives' whose 'kids float tins down dirty rapids'. But here, too, Lewis's attempt to symbolise the greed and cruelty of the capitalists in the mythological figure of Circe is awkward and self-conscious. In both these poems, Lewis's 'literariness' takes away the frankness and honesty that characterise the poems of, say, Davies and Massfield, about the poor and the deprived. Nevertheless, the poems are significant in so far as they indicate Lewis's genuine concern for the poor and the oppressed, a concern which was later on extended to the Indian



peasants and 'the landless soldiers' of war.

Twenty-six of the forty-seven poems in *Raiders' Dawn* grew out of Lewis's experiences in the army. They are quite varied in attitude, altering with changes in his own experiences. It is important to remember that his poems are directly related to his personal experiences. While in the 'Author's Note' to *Raiders' Dawn* he called the poems 'a personal statement', in the foreword to his next volume of poems he remarked: '(I) consider my poems as expressions of personal experience.' Moreover, he felt that he always needed to be near an experience in order to write about it creatively. He explained this in a letter to his wife:

... I always realize this when I'm trying to write a poem or a story. . . if I get too far away from the *thing*, the *thought* becomes flabby and invalid, and it weighs on me with a dead weight and all the creative vitality dies in me.<sup>10</sup>

It would be appropriate, therefore, to refer to his letters and other relevant sources to find out what those first reactions to army life were which supplied him with the raw material for his 'Poems in Khaki'. Such a method would give us a clue to the working of Lewis's mind, which produced the poems.

Lewis hated the boredom and separation involved in life at a training camp: 'I wish I was in London, or Mountain Ash, or the cockpit of a Spitfire. Not just eating government food and wasting my own time.'<sup>11</sup> And in the 'Author's Note' to *The Last Inspection*, he pointed out that in the stories 'the main motif is the rootless life of soldiers having no enemy, and always, somehow, under a shadow'. Indeed, the isolation of the soldier from all that he had hitherto been familiar with, and the threatening catastrophe and death are the themes of some of the poems in *Raiders' Dawn*. 'The Soldier' deals, not only with a sense of banishment, but also a consciousness of cleavage within himself. The opening stanzas set the scene, with their contrasting expressions, e.g., turbulence and Time (which alleviates pain), volcanic fires and glaciers, sunlight and nightmares. Despite the romantic phraseology like 'the flashing of wings' and 'Hall of Mirrors', the poet is able, in the first section of the poem, to create the soldier's sense of catastrophe and helplessness. In the next section, he evokes a beautiful picture of joy and love amidst natural beauty, from which the soldier finds himself alienated:

I who am agonized by thought  
And war and love  
Grow calm again  
With watching  
The flash and play of finches  
Who are as beautiful  
And as indifferent to me  
As England is, this Spring morning.

Here, the power of life-denying forces is felt as strongly as a heightened consciousness of life. A similar undercurrent runs through 'The Sentry', with the significant difference that now the soldier looks at the beautiful life before he went to the war as a thing of the distant past, and is haunted by an overwhelming apprehension of his impending death. Lewis conveys this sense of the eventual end of life through images of sleep, silence and night:

I have left  
The lovely bodies of the boy and girl  
Deep in each other's placid arms,  
And I have left  
The beautiful lanes of sleep  
That barefoot lovers follow to this last  
Cold shore of thought that I guard.  
I have begun to die  
And the guns' implacable silence  
Is my black interim, my youth and age,  
In the flower of fury, the folded poppy,  
Night.

Lewis believed that his present weariness and overwhelming sadness were the symptoms of the present conditions around him and his fellow-soldiers, and that such shadows would soon pass thus enabling him and others to be creative and hopeful again. In an unpublished letter to his friend Llewellyn Wyn Griffith (deposited at the National Library of Wales) he had remarked:

The last six months—during which I have been commissioned—have so undermined my *self* that I value with the half-apathetic mind of a sick person the professions of faith that come my way.

I find it hardest to identify 2/Lt A. Lewis with Alun Lewis: and I believe it's not confined to me, but is a general symptom of the *Now* through which Britain is passing. My great hope is that this sadness and weariness is an adolescent rather than an aged disease, and contains its own remedy. But how *hard* it is, like a black stone.

One way to face the present predicament was to adopt the stance of impersonality. That was what Lewis did in the poem 'All Day It Has Rained', the beautifully modulated longer lines of which evoke a sense of boredom, inertia and indifference. His short story 'Lance-Jack' reads like a prose statement of the various moods and feelings out of which 'All Day It Has Rained' grew. For instance, in the story the author states:

A soldier is always impersonal. That's the only way to preserve any privacy in conditions where one is never alone. Eight in a tent, lying on groundsheet, feet to the tentpole, kit piled high and in small space by one's side. Writing letters, looking at snaps, cutting toenails, sewing buttons, contemplating something distant, brooding over something immediate. It is all impersonal. (pp. 75-76)

In the poem too, there is this sense of impersonality and indifference. He identifies himself with his comrades, does the dull chores in an army camp —

And we stretched out, unbuttoning our braces,  
Smoking a Woodbine, darning dirty socks,  
Reading the Sunday papers—

and regards with casual indifference the 'duties' and the motives of the warlords:

And we talked of girls, and dropping bombs on Rome,  
And thought of the quiet dead and the loud celebrities  
Exhorting us to slaughter, and the herded refugees.

Like his fellow-soldiers, he looks at his civilian past, and the future, through a haze of mist, and submits himself entirely to 'the brooding over something immediate':

Yet thought softly, morosely of them, and as indifferently  
 As of ourselves or those whom we  
 For years have loved, and will again  
 To-morrow maybe love; but now it is the rain  
 Possesses us entirely, the twilight and the rain.

But he is different from his comrades-in-arms. As a well educated civilian—and a poet—he has his moments of vision. Just as the protagonist in 'Lance-Jack' indulged in some kind of a reverie:

The forest is blue and hazy with warmth and distance, like lavender,  
 and the sandy path runs forward to the cluster of tents on the  
 open heath. I see only the distance, the forest, and I half forget my  
 khaki and imagine myself an itinerant preacher....(p. 85)

so Lewis in this poem envisions a world of idyllic beauty in which children play, and 'where Edward Thomas brooded long'. But this picture is undercut by images of children 'shaking down burning chest-nuts', and of Edward Thomas's 'song' being stopped by a bullet—thus giving due recognition to the threat of war.

'To Edward Thomas' attempts to see death as a natural commitment which he has to accept, as Edward Thomas did. While reviewing Edward Thomas's *The Trumpet and Other Poems* for *Horizon*, Alun Lewis had said:

As a War Poet say that he (Thomas) did not suffer as Sassoon, Owen, Rosenberg and was not embittered beyond bearing, but felt it as a profound and serious experience, a voice in him—Death, the ultimate response, that he, despite himself, desired. The war came to him as to his dead ploughman, naturally, he accepted his own death and, it seems to me, the death of every fated soldier.<sup>12</sup>

In the poem ('To Edward Thomas'), Lewis visits the Edward Thomas memorial stone in Hampshire. Amidst the pastoral surroundings which had inspired the older poet, Lewis also feels 'lonely and exalted by the friendship of the wind'. In the fourth stanza, he goes on to reflect on the failures and frustration that Edward Thomas had encountered:

And in the lonely house there was no ease  
 For you, or Helen, or those small perplexed  
 Children of yours who only wished to please.

In this predicament, Lewis believes, Edward Thomas was inspired by the 'voice' which dissolved all worldly ties, and he found himself in a 'dream'. This state is akin to death because it transcends all material considerations. From this 'dream' to the 'ultimate dream', i.e., death, is a natural progression. Thus, when Lewis speaks in the last line of Thomas's death in active service in Arras, the suggestion is that through death the older poet achieved some kind of spiritual fulfilment, 'the ultimate response that he, despite himself, desired'.

Lewis comes out with a more earthy interpretation of man's role in war in 'After Dunkirk'. In this poem, he finds human life at a critical point in history, when old forms suddenly seem irrelevant. He rejects the ideals of politicians and democrats. He realises that now even personal relationships have to be sacrificed—'A growing self-detachment making man/Less home-sick, fearful, proud'—in order to liberate the imagination, which would then have a wider perspective:

The dark imagination that would pierce  
Infinite night and reach the waiting arms  
And soothe the guessed-at tears.

Once that stage is reached, one can envisage new life emerging out of ruins:

New resolution grows  
In shell-shocked minds of frightened boys  
To live again, within the heightened vision  
Of life as they saw it in the hour of battle  
When the worn and beautiful faces of the half-forgotten  
Came softly round them with the holy power  
To raise the wounded and the dying succour,  
Making complete all that was misbegotten  
Or clumsily abused or left neglected.

Here the affirmation seems to stand despite—in fact, is fed by—the realities which deny it. A similar attempt to force triumph out of defeat is made in 'Threnody For a Starry Night', in which Lewis universalises the picture and traces the tragic pattern through past ages:

Socrates on the frozen lake  
Sat awhile and heard, disconsolate,  
The blind, unnerving harmonies of fate.  
And always in Shakespearean tragedy °  
The foils are poisoned that the good may die.

It is with the knowledge that 'the foils are poisoned that the good may die' that Lewis is able to accept the sacrifices of the soldiers:

And in the dark the sensitive blind hands  
Fashion the burning pitch of night  
In lovely images of dawn.

The soldiers' frozen sightless eyes  
End the mad feud. The worm is love.

These were just a few of the many ways Lewis was looking at the war. From a comparatively safe position, during his period of military training, he was able to contemplate the possibility that through war's destruction some positive alternative might be discovered.

Up to November 1940, he had been assigned to the camp loco sheds, and then he was transferred to the staff of the Army Education Officer. In this capacity, he found time—and sufficient facilities—to write. He wanted to be permanently transferred to the Education Corps, but his application was rejected. So, he applied for an infantry commission, and was accepted, and was sent for officer training to Morecambe in Lancashire. He was not at all happy in the company of the officers, and was repelled by their arrogance, stupidity and class consciousness. He satirised their behaviour in his short stories, notably in 'Almost A Gentleman', and also wrote a poem called 'Finale' which portrayed one of them ironically. The officer posed his way through life. But war fixed him in a posture that was both terrible and permanent:

Today he struck a final gesture,  
Arms akimbo against the sky,  
Crucified on a cross of fire.

The poem, however, ends on a philosophic note in which death is regarded as a deliverer from the confusion of living: °

He had no choice in this, yet seems content  
That life's confused dishonesty  
Should find this last simplicity.

Lewis was bitterly disappointed over the fact that he could do nothing constructive as an officer. He had said to his friend J. Maclaren-Ross: 'I thought that as an officer I'd be able to do something for the men. But one's more helpless than ever', and Maclaren-Ross himself had noted that 'Lewis had a deep tenderness towards life itself'.<sup>13</sup> In June 1942, Lewis was sent to Lulworth in Dorset for wireless training, and it was at this time that he visited T. E. Lawrence's cottage in Cloud's Hill. Here he found some valuable observations in one of T. E. Lawrence's letters: 'As for fame after death, it's a thing to spit at; the only minds worth winning are the warm ones about us. If we miss those we are failures.'<sup>14</sup> It is in this context that one can better understand what was going on in his mind when he said to his friend Richard Mills:

He (Robert Graves) warned me against becoming too democratic—poets are not democratic in their poetry but only in their lives. Do you accept? I don't. I wrote back and said that my whole power, such as it is, springs from one source—humility—which alone engenders and resolves my perpetual struggle against the arrogant and the submissive, the victors, and the vanquished. I think I am working from the only true source these days: if I succeed (I use the word in no vulgar sense) I will have helped to make the world gentler, more understanding, more beautiful therefore. I don't mind sweating my soul out for such an end.<sup>15</sup>

These utterances acquire richer significance when one realises that they came from the poet who had earlier felt so tenderly towards the miserable miners of his native Wales. When he found himself trapped by the treacherous forces of war, he clung more and more to 'the warm ones about us'. The first impulse, however, was to seek the love of woman. In poems like 'Post-Script: For Gweno' and 'On a Bereaved Girl', love survives the calamities of war. In the former poem, his wife will abide with him like 'a singing rib within my dreaming side', even when he is engaged in his encounter with 'uncaught, untamed' death. And in the other poem, the girl will have a deeper understanding of her relationship with her lover after his

death: she will realise that 'the fled-away is eternal within her'. But perhaps more important are those poems in which a sustaining value amidst the catastrophe of war is sought, not in personal terms, but in terms of the vast humanity in general. Poems like 'Odi Et Amo' point in that direction, but more such poems were to come in his next volume *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets*. The lines along which his mind was moving is best exemplified in the short story 'They Came'. In that story, the soldier, Taffy, returns from home after finding that his wife was killed and his house destroyed in an air-raid, and submits himself to the world:

'My life belongs to the world', he said, 'I will do what I can'. He moved along the spur and looked down at the snow-grey ever-green woods and the glinting roofs scattered over the rich land. And down in the valley the church bells began pealing, pealing, and he laughed like a lover, seeing his beloved.<sup>16</sup>

After the abandonment of his personal life, the soldier finds a new beauty and richness in nature—'the glinting roofs scattered over the rich land'—and a new love for humanity.

However, Lewis was not sure that he had finally found a direction for his life and poetry. J. Maclaren-Ross has recalled how Lewis felt the night before he left for India:

On the night before Lewis's mob was due to leave, we sat on a rusty abandoned roller in a field of long grass. Lewis did not talk much, he was depressed. Once he said: 'I'm not sure that I want to go really', and later: 'But there'll be something to get to grips with out there.'<sup>17</sup>

Just before leaving, he urged his wife to join him in abandoning themselves to the war, very much in the spirit of Taffy, in the short story 'They Came':

I say we must lose ourselves in the war and go each into the unknown and neither of us must cling to a past memory or a future hope but we must give to the world and suffer the world and become its accidents, and so grow rich.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, when he arrived in India, the writer in him asserted itself:



I don't know whether to dive in or stay on the bank and concern myself with tanks only. At least I considered both courses, but the insatiable humanist and the restless writer in me will probably impel me to abandon neutrality and seek in India as in England the true story and the proper ending.<sup>19</sup>

This is an ambiguous statement. Though Lewis seems to indicate therein a hope that a more active life would probably lead him to write better poetry, it is possible to interpret his words to mean that he was seeking more experiences *in order* to write better poetry. Even in his general behaviour, he seems to have given the latter impression. That was how his instructor felt, though Lewis vigorously denied it:

When I was leaving Karachi, one of the instructors said to me, 'You're the most selfish man I've ever met, Lewis. You think the war exists for you to write books about it.' I didn't deny it, though it's all wrong. I hadn't the strength to explain what is instinctive and categorical in me, the need to experience. The writing is only a proof of the sincerity of the experience, that's all.<sup>20</sup>

The quest for experience is perhaps an admirable trait in man, but that alone, or the 'sincerity of experience', cannot in itself ensure the creation of significant poetry. Lewis did not quite realize his master Rilke's belief that the whole possibility of human suffering (or joy) can be envisaged in a single incident, or a single set of circumstances. On the other hand, he was not always able to relate his various experiences to the total scheme of things. It is for this reason that his poems in *Ha! Ha! Among The Trumpets* too are extremely varied and uneven, depending on the impact that a particular experience made on him, and what technical expertise happened to be available to him at that particular moment. One tenuous thread that runs through his life, letters, short stories and poems in India is one of movement towards death and extinction, a movement which is chequered by diverse moods and meditations. His letters, written from India, show how he himself regarded his poems as a mere reflection of his various moods—he described the poems of his second volume as 'a queer batch, written in queer moods over a long period'<sup>21</sup>—and as late as January 1944 (he died the following March) he was still hoping that he would find a 'constructive purpose' to guide his pen:

Oh! if only I had the composure and self-detachment to write of all these things. But everything is fluid in me, an undigested mass of experience, without shape or plot or purpose. And it is as well to let it be so, for it's a true reflection of this now we scramble through. . . . I'd like to wait until I can get a stronger and more constructive purpose to guide my pen.<sup>22</sup>

But the second volume does present Lewis as a maturer poet. The striking difference between *Raiders' Dawn* and *Ha! Ha! Among The Trumpets* is that the poems in the latter volume bear evidence of the fact that the poet's feelings are now more immediate and more concretely realized. Most of the poems in the first section of *Ha! Ha! Among The Trumpets* recapitulate the feelings and attitudes of poems in *Raiders' Dawn*, but it is done with greater firmness and economy. 'A Welsh Night' grows out of a sense of apprehension and a general feeling of sadness. The effect of the war on the Welsh miners who, for instance, had appeared in 'The Mountain Over Aberdare', has been to aggravate the misery in their lives. Lewis evokes the appropriate background of 'the coal-tipped misty slopes/Of old Garth mountain' against which the Welsh families lead their lives, made more wretched now because the women are forced to work in munition factories, and their men-folk have been enlisted into the army:

Munition girls with yellow hands  
Clicking bone needles over khaki scarves,  
Schoolboys' painful numerals in a book,  
A mother's chilblained fingers soft  
Upon the bald head of a suckling child,  
But no man in the house to clean the grate  
Or bolt the outside door or share the night.

Lewis's firm grasp of the actual is demonstrated in his graphic description of young girls working in war factories, and the mother rearing her child singlehandedly. This is much more moving than the effect created in 'The Mountain Over Aberdare', where Lewis's lavish use of adjectives and self-conscious allusions diffuse the focus. Similarly, 'Infantry' is very much like his earlier poems, 'The Soldier' and 'The Sentry', with the significant difference that whereas in the earlier poems there is a consciousness of the positive aspects of life,

however remote, in 'Infantry' there is a sense of resignation and futility, symbolised in lines like:

All mortal anguish shrunk into an ache  
Too nagging to be worth the catch of breath.

Moreover, there is a complete impersonality on the part of the soldiers who play their roles mechanically:

Enduring to the end the early cold  
The emptiness of noon, the void of night.

There was one more theme that Lewis took up again, the theme of love and separation, and here too it is tempting to compare and contrast the earlier and the later poems on the subject. Beside 'Goodbye', poems like 'Post-Script : To Gweno' and 'Lines On a Bereaved Girl' sound callow and sentimental. In 'Goodbye' the apprehensions of the girl are juxtaposed with the soldier's sense of resignation. And these feelings lead them to a deeper understanding of the implications of their own place in the universe. The soldier spends the last night with his wife before leaving for active service, and all that he looks forward to is just plain love-making. But the frightened expression in his wife's eyes suddenly makes him aware of darker experiences to come:

Your kisses close my eyes and yet you stare  
As though God struck a child with nameless fears;  
Perhaps the water glitters and discloses  
Time's chalice and its limpid useless tears.

Everything we renounce except ourselves;  
Selfishness is the last of all to go;  
Our sighs are exhalations of the earth,  
Our footprints leave a track across the snow.

The poet does not stop at this point. If the lovers come to a deeper realisation of the tragic nature of life, they also grow conscious of a greater meaning in their relationship, a meaning which stretches beyond physical attraction:

Yet when all's done you'll keep the emerald  
 I placed upon your finger in the street;  
 And I will keep the patches that you sewed  
 On my old battledress tonight, my sweet.

Though the idea of the soldier cherishing the patches that his wife has sewn on his battledress may seem trite and sentimental, it is not so in the present context. In fact, the poet succeeds in convincingly suggesting the continuation of love, whether it is symbolised by emeralds or patches. Moreover, one must notice the greater economy and precision with which Lewis conveys the feelings and thoughts of these two lovers on their, perhaps, last night together.

When Lewis left England and sailed for India, he tried to alleviate the painful feelings of separation by choosing to believe in a good, however vague, outcome of his future commitments. 'On Embarkation' grows out of this mood, and it is an interesting poem primarily because it contains, within itself, a little vague subjective hope, which is stifled by a consciousness of more pressing and immediate realities. The poem starts on a reflective note, and the poet finds it easy to indulge in a benign speculation about the eventual result of his long voyage into 'the long Unseen' and 'the strange Unknown':

Each of us is invisible to himself,  
 Our eyes grow neutral in the long Unseen,  
 We take or do not take a hand of cards,  
 We shake down nightly in the strange Unknown.  
 Yet each one has a hankering in the blood,  
 A dark relation that disturbs his joke  
 And will not be abandoned with a shrug;  
 Each has a shrunken inkling of the Good.

But at the end of this section of the poem there is an unconscious realisation of the limitation of this vague subjective hope:

But others, lacking the power of reflection,  
 Broke ship, impelled by different emotions.

Indeed, Lewis himself seems to be at his best—and most natural—when, instead of indulging in general reflections, he recalls his visit

home on his last leave, and the entire native landscape comes up in its minute idyllic details, details that he knows he would 'need' when he goes out to strange and unknown lands:

Just here you leave this Cardiganshire lane,  
Here by these milk churns and this telegraph pole,  
Latch up the gate and cut across the fields.  
Some things you see in detail, those you need;  
The raindrops spurting from the trodden stubble  
Squirting your face across the reaping meadow,  
The strange machine-shaped scarab beetle  
His scalloped legs clung bandy to a stalk,  
The Jew's-harp bee with saddlebags of gold,  
The wheat as thin as hair on flinty slopes  
The harsh hewn faces of the farming folks . . .

Lewis's apparent enthusiasm for, and familiarity with, such homely scenes helps him to create evocative poetry which is firmly rooted in first-hand observations, and precise descriptive ability. But as the poem develops, the essential reality of the soldiers' predicament pierces through as the women foresee the doom of their men, which they cannot hide behind their smiles and laughter:

Or maybe when he laughs and bends to make  
Her laugh with him she sees that he must die,  
Because his eyes declare it plain as day.

The poem therefore ends on a very subdued note. Now, neither the 'shrunk inkling of the Good' nor a nostalgic longing for home seems quite relevant. He knows that he is going into the dark—and this Lewis conveys through the telling image of a ship slipping into the vast sea in the dark of night—and all that he can do is not to hope but to pray. And that prayer is a poignant cry for a better world for his progeny:

The steel bows break, the churning screw burns white  
Each pallid face wears an unconscious smile,  
And I—I pray my unborn tiny child  
Has five good senses and an earth as kind  
As the sweet breast of her who gives him milk  
And waves me down this first clandestine mile.

However, this was too pessimistic and resigned an attitude for a poet and Lewis's letters and Journals show that he was constantly trying to find some alternative value that could sustain him in the impasse. The man who had been in sympathy with the Welsh miners now felt tenderness for the poor soldiers around him who lived in squalid circumstances:

The bunks piled to the roof round the hatches and on the hatches,  
men like maggots playing 'Housey-Housey', and the croupier  
shouting the numbers in a voice like a bull. Hammocks, beer bot-  
tles, oranges, bare legs protruding from shirts, sweat and smell and  
foetid warmth. And we've only just begun!<sup>23</sup>

These men appeared in the poem 'A Troopship In the Tropics':

Deep in the foetid holds the tiered bunks  
Hold restless men who sweat and toss and sob;  
The gamblers on the hatches, in the corner  
The accordionist and barber do their job.

The smell of oranges and excrement  
Moves among those who write uneasy letters  
Or slouch about and curse the stray dejection  
That chafes them with its hard majestic fetters.

Lewis greatly enjoyed being an entertainment officer for these men, arranging concerts and competitions for them. This was his way of doing 'something for the men'.

And when he encountered the injustices meted out to the natives of the colonies, his sympathies were further extended to them. As he came in contact with diverse cultures and different problems, both his imagination and vision expanded. His ship *Athlone Castle* had two ports of call: at Belia in Brazil, and Durban. He had first-hand acquaintance with racial problems in South Africa, and was outraged on realizing that 'to equip and humiliate people seems to be our general policy'.<sup>24</sup> But far from being content with being a missionary in his attitude towards the victims, Lewis groped for some ideal beyond 'the European's measured hate':

But now the white-faced tourist must translate  
His old unsated longing to adventure

Beyond the European's measured hate  
 Into the dangerous oceans of past and future.

Where trembling intimations will reveal  
 The illusion of this blue mulatto sleep  
 And in that chaos like a migrant eel  
 Will breed a new direction through the deep.

(‘Port of Call: Brazil’)

This was, in some ways, a turning point in Lewis's career. He had already moved from the uncertain hope ‘of the Good’ (‘On Embarkation’) to ‘the trembling intimations’ of the present poem. This was because he was coming to recognise that there was ~~only~~ a spiritual solution to his personal problems, as there had been for Rilke. Ian Hamilton substantiates this point by quoting from Lewis's unpublished Journals:

The poem (‘To Rilke’) was started on the boat just before its arrival at Bombay when Lewis was ill in bed from food poisoning, and it was completed at his first camp in India. He had had a dream in which he had returned home to Wales to find that he had died and Gweno, when he embraced her, had become a different woman, blonde, lavishly dressed and bejewelled; ‘and the jewels flashed and I put out my hands to touch her shoulders, but couldn’t’.

At this point the dream ends, and Lewis writes of it: ‘I realized the significance of the dream before I got out of bed. It came seeping uncomfortably into my understanding, *that I had gone back there in the only way possible, the spiritual way*, having passed first through the spiritual experience of death.’ It was immediately after this dream, and in the conviction that it had told him the truth, that he began to contemplate a poem to Rilke.

He approached me when we were lying off India and I asked him about *silence* and what price one paid for going my way—through the panzer divisions of the century—and whether he would have found his silence there. Robert Graves said in a letter that Milton would have profited from serving in the army, but I don’t know whether this is so. Some men have—it seems to destroy others.<sup>25</sup>

The poem, however, was not completed until a couple of weeks after his arrival in India, during which time he had at least one of the several encounters that he had with a granite Buddha set amidst desolate plains. It was then that he experienced tranquillity and 'silence', despite the suffering and desolation of the Indian scene:

...and Buddha carved by a village craftsman lying there in a simplicity so complete and timeless and artless that all the tranquillity and persistence of the East was caught in the stones and hills and plains, and Tony and Jack hallooed across the rocky fields and I turned towards them. I felt wonderfully happy, wonderfully happy. So much so that I had to tell Tony 'I feel so happy'.<sup>26</sup>

When Lewis sat down to write the poem, he felt that he belonged to the brotherhood of artists like Rilke, who had an intuitive perception.

Of what can develop and what must be always endured  
And what the live may answer to the dead.

But he realised that whereas an artist like Rilke, to whom 'silence' came as a birthday present never lacked 'an occasion', he always had to seek an occasion; also, that in his pursuit 'Labour, fatigue' supervened. And although he was able to catch flashes of spiritual intimation—

I knew that unknown lands  
Were near and real, like an act of birth—

he soon 'fell ill and restless'. He envied Rilke at such moments because he was free from such distractions. Lewis was acutely conscious of the fact that his own predicament was different from that of Rilke, and wondered whether 'he would have found silence there', i.e., in Lewis's conditions. He himself was overwhelmed by the fact that he was so far away from his native land and was in an alien country which was teeming with darkness and distress:

I sit within the tent, within the darkness  
Of India, and the wind disturbs my lamp.

But he made one final effort to believe that it did not really matter that there was so much suffering and poverty around him. Simpli-



city and silence could be found in—will perhaps justify—human suffering:

And I know that in this it does not matter  
Where one may be or what fate lies ahead.

And Vishnu, carved by some rude pious hand,  
Lies by a heap of stones, demanding nothing  
But the simplicity that she and I  
Discovered in a way you'd understand  
Once and for ever, Rilke, but in Oh a distant land.

Though the poem ended with the rediscovery of spiritual values, something which aligned Lewis with Rilke, the journey for Lewis had not been so smooth. In fact, the last words, 'but in Oh a distant land', anticipated the difficulties that lay in his way. These words are ambiguous, or at any rate open to more than one interpretation. They may refer to Rilke who, being dead, was removed to a 'distant land' or to the fact that both he and his wife had discovered the simplicity (which was now demanded by the image of Vishnu) in the now distant Wales. However, the most likely suggestion is that the simplicity that both he and his wife had discovered once was the very thing demanded now, but he found that it was difficult to rediscover it in the distant land of India.

It was ironical that Lewis found that the silence and simplicity, which he had discovered earlier, seemed threatened by spectacles of suffering in the land which had preached those very spiritual ideals through the ages. 'Karanje Village' demonstrates this dilemma in vibrant poetic terms. The poet who wanted to 'go East and East and East, *faire le tour*; there is consummation somewhere'<sup>27</sup> goes on a spiritual quest in his poem. He is frustrated and distressed by sights of poverty and suffering before coming face to face with higher truths as they are enshrined in the village temple. Even though he seems to accept them, he finds himself, in the end, in a state of indecision and doubt. The opening lines of the poem—

The sweeper said Karanje had a temple  
A roof of gold in the gaon—

remind one of Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*, whom Evangelist asks, at the beginning of the journey, 'Do you see yonder shining light?'.

Just as Bunyan's pilgrim's immediate confrontation was with the Slough of Despond, and people like Obstinate, Lewis could hardly see 'a roof of gold'. Instead:

But I saw only the long-nosed swine and the vultures  
Groping the refuse for carrion,

And the burial cairns on the hill with its spout of dust  
Where the mules stamp and graze,  
The naked children begging, the elders in poverty,  
The sun's dry beat and glaze.

The picture of poverty, misery and squalor is intensified in the next two stanzas by the poet's heaping one squalid image upon another, images like 'The old hags mumbling by the well' and 'monkeys loping obscenely round our smell'. After this, the silence and simplicity of Vishnu are conveyed with remarkable effect through changed images of stern simplicity and austerity:

And alone by a heap of stones in the lonely salt plain  
A little Vishnu of stone,  
Silently and eternally simply Being,  
Bidding me come alone.

The poet is warned of the flesh, which enmeshes 'the singing bird of the soul'. But he is distracted by the people around who 'are hard and hungry and have no love', and as such is uncertain whether he or his sweetheart can fully accept Vishnu's message:

And Love must wait, as the unknown yellow poppy  
Whose lovely fragile petals are unfurled  
Among the lizards in this wasted land.  
And when my sweetheart calls me shall I tell her  
That I am seeking less and less of this world?  
And will she understand?

Lewis gives the impression of being too practical-minded to achieve any kind of spiritual self-realisation. That is why we find him quickly moving from a nebulous spiritual groping to something more concrete and physical. The pathetic plight of the Indian peasants reawakened

the humanitarian spirit in him. He shelved personal considerations of his own self, and wondered about *their* condition. Characteristically enough, in the face of pressing physical problems, he found little spiritual or religious salvation for the Indians, who were the victims of exploitation by the ruling class, nature's cruelties and their own passive, inert tolerance. In 'Maharatta Ghats', the answer to the question, whether the hard-working woman would eventually be somehow redeemed, is:

But no ! She cannot move. Each arid patch  
Owns the lean folk who plough and scythe and thatch  
Its grudging yield and scratch its stubborn stones,  
The small gods suck the marrow from their bones.

Similarly, the poem 'Holi' celebrates the Hindu festival of Spring when the lands are fertile and the greenery of springtime is all around. Amidst the dancing and the drum-beating of the peasants, the poet detects their suffering which their God cannot alleviate:

Blood drips from the drumskins,  
The youths and girls obey  
The wild God's uttermost intent,  
And sob, and turn away,

And turn to the Indian forest  
And there they are as one—  
One with the dust and darkness  
When the God's last will is done.

Or again, in 'Village Funeral: Maharashtra', the poet's descriptions of the powers of the various Hindu gods assume ironical overtones when set besides the abject fact that the poor peasant leads each succeeding life in the same misery:

Nandi, bull of holiness,  
Ganapathi, elephantine force,  
Siva, destroyer and sparer,  
Consider this poor corpse.

Not being and then being,  
—Cowdung fire, bed of earth,—

How shall the peasant fare between  
One birth and another birth.

Such a picture of the life of the Indian peasant aroused in Lewis a dazed compassion rather than promise of any spiritual nourishment for his own self. Some critics tend to exaggerate the influence of the Indian scene on Lewis when they believe that 'the simple humanity' of the Indian peasant became some kind of an ideal for him. On the contrary, Lewis, the poet, looked at the Indian peasant with the detachment and wonderment of a foreigner. Surely, he felt sympathy for them, which made him wish 'I had come here as a doctor, teacher, social worker: anything but a soldier'.<sup>28</sup> But for his poetic purposes, he started to view them with growing detachment. He began to see in their lives the undisturbed continuity of human life, and their indifference to the problems and aspirations which beset the lives of more sophisticated people. He wrote an excellent poem on this theme, called 'The Peasants'. The peasant of the poem is dwarf, barefoot and half-awake; as he ploughs his field he steps 'lightly and lazily among the thorn trees'. The women work hard and carry burdens, but at the same time they are sources of abundant human life:

The women breaking stones upon the highway,  
Walking erect with burdens on their heads,  
One body growing in another body,  
Creation touching verminous straw beds.

The third stanza shifts the focus on to the soldiers, who 'straggle by', as contrasted with the 'stepping lightly' of the peasant. The dying soldiers are a proof that the History or Civilisation is in danger, but the peasant who seems to symbolise the eternal flow of life is just indifferent to all these temporary excitements. Lewis's objectivity lends the poem a power and individuality all its own. There is no room for sentimentality. The two pictures are presented without the poet's own comments. The soldiers represent the sophisticated Western World, to save which they are fighting and dying. On the other hand, the peasants are seen for what they are, poor and half-awake, eking out a bare subsistence by working hard, thereby representing the basic instinct for survival in man.

Lewis felt that the lives of the Indian people were unbearably painful, yet the fact that they lived on the way they did was enormously

interesting. He was both fascinated and repelled by the colour and squalor of the Indian scene, and he conveyed his feelings through descriptions which, with his mature gift of phrasing and skilful use of rhyme, assonance and alliteration, are indicative of his improved craftsmanship. Thus, for instance, 'Indian Day' begins with a tableau, whose brightness and colour tend to obscure the harsher realities of the scene, even when they are mentioned:

The supple sweeper girl goes by  
Brushing the dung of camels from the street  
The daylight's silver bangles  
Glitter on her naked feet.

And here is an Indian landscape:

Yellow ramtilla stiffens in the moon,  
Jackals skulk among the screes,  
In skinny fields the oxen shiver  
The gods have prophesied disease.

Such poems are interesting, but since they are generally only sensitive descriptions they demand, under the weight of 'reportage', no complex responses. In a sense, therefore, Lewis's poems about India are the results of a detached and leisurely contemplation of an intriguing foreign scene. Gordon Symes is therefore right in believing that 'India remains a background, sensitively apprehended, but a background'.<sup>29</sup> It must be remembered that during the greater part of his stay in India, he led a very humdrum life, with little excitement and less adventure. And he was not imaginatively haunted, as Douglas was with his 'bête noire', or as Keyes was with his passion to discover 'the Ultima Thule of Romanticism'. Only two months before he was killed, Lewis noted:

But the most satisfying thing that I do these days is dig a trench or hack a bamboo down or find that my compass calculations through the jungle brought me exactly to the spot I planned. . . . It's a strange easy interlude in my life, this January in the wilds. But I want life to become serious and purposive again.<sup>30</sup>

His attitude all along had been to view the war impersonally and to wait for his 'great moment' after it was all over. Far from considering

war as an integral part of the whole human experience, he looked at it as a menacing shadow which must eventually pass. It was for this reason that most of his Indian poems are impressionistic, and the few isolated personal pieces like 'The Way Back' and 'Home Thoughts From Abroad' are mainly nostalgic reveries.

But Lewis was, in the last months of his life, driven more and more to deal with his own predicament as a soldier who was going to die. 'The Journey' shows him as an entranced spectator of the Indian scene with its 'caravansarais' of gypsies, 'the donkeys grey as mice and mincing camels', but there is also an apprehension of death and all that it implies:

There was also the memory of Death  
And the recurrent irritation of ourselves.  
But the wind so wound its ways about us,  
Beyond this living and this loving,  
This calculation and provision, this fearing,  
That neither of us heard the quiet voice calling us,  
Remorse like rain softening and rotting the ground,  
We felt no sorrow in the singing bird  
Forgot the sadness we had left behind.

These lines echo the sentiments that we had already encountered in his earlier poems like 'All Day It Has Rained' and 'The Sentry', but the apprehension of death in the present poem is much more immediate. The first impulse now, at the thought of death, is to turn nostalgically towards the homeland, and desperately hope that love would survive all calamities after all. He underwent hospital treatment for a broken jaw which he received at a football match, and it was then that he prefigured death. In his 'In Hospital: Poona' poems, he tried to assert some alternative value in the face of death. In the first poem, he conjures up an idyllic picture of Wales:

And like to a swan or moon the whole of Wales  
Glided within the parish of my care:  
I saw the green tide leap on Cardigan,  
Your red yatch riding like a legend there,...

And then :

And then ten thousand miles of daylight grew  
 Between us, and I heard the wild daws crape  
 In India's starving throat; whereat I knew  
 That Time upon the heart can break  
 But love survives the venom of the snake.

In 'In Hospital: Poona (2)', Lewis envisages death under the influence of anaesthesia, and sees a 'void where Pain demands no cheap release', where 'mind lies coiled within green icebound streams'. The outcome of this dream gets lost in the dense and diverse metaphors of the lines, though optimism seems to rest on a vague 'hope that has no food' and the 'heart's calm voice that stills the baying hounds'.

A more explicit—though perhaps a more abstract—outcome of death is imagined in the poem 'Burma Casualty'. A wounded soldier comes to the hospital, utterly disgusted with the horror and the meaninglessness of the operations he had been engaged in. The doctors tell him that his leg has to be amputated, to which:

'Take it', he said, 'I hate the bloody thing'.

But under the influence of anaesthesia, he experiences 'darkness', and when he returns to consciousness, he realises that that kind of darkness is preferable to life—life, whose meaningless sufferings come out in greater relief in the context of war:

The dark is a beautiful singing sexless angel  
 Her hands so soft you scarcely feel her touch  
 Gentle, eternally gentle, round your heart.  
 She flatters and unsexes every man.

And life is only a crude, pigheaded churl  
 Frowsy and starving, daring to suffer alone.

Lewis had ascribed a death-wish to Edward Thomas—that was the reason for the reference to 'the hinted land' in the poem 'To Edward Thomas'. Moreover, when he reviewed Thomas's *The Trumpet and Other Poems*, he had remarked: 'Death—the ultimate response that he (Edward Thomas), despite himself, desired'. Thomas was certainly obsessed by the transience and mutability of most worldly

objects and human experience, and he spoke of a world beyond, which lay outside man's conscious grasp. In 'Lights Out', he is willing to forsake the 'dearest' objects in order to penetrate the unknown:

There is not any book  
Or face of dearest look  
That I would not turn from now  
To go into the unknown.

By losing himself in the 'unknown', he envisages a mysterious fulfilment:

The tall forest towers;  
Its cloudy foliage lowers  
Ahead, shelf above shelf:  
In silence I hear and obey  
That I may lose my way  
And myself.

The controlled rhythm and the disarming simplicity of the lines help to create an effect of mystery and strength that is highly complex.

Lewis's wish for death, on the other hand, is less subtle: it becomes a longing for escape. He had written to his wife that 'death does not fascinate me half as powerfully as life', but had gone on to point out in the same letter, 'Death is the great mystery, who can ignore him?'<sup>37</sup> And as it turned out, towards the end of his life, he more and more sought death in his desire to go through all the experiences that life could offer. In August 1943, he was sent to Karachi to attend an intelligence course, on the completion of which he was offered an instructor's job which would have kept him away from active warfare. He turned down the offer, partly out of his loyalty towards fellow Welsh soldiers, but mainly because he wanted to undergo war experiences as a fighting soldier:

It's time I took a harder job in a way. Yet I'm frightened of leaving them (the Welsh soldiers). They seem to have some secret knowledge that I want and will never find out until I go into action with them and war really happens to them. I dread missing such a thing, it seems desertion to something more than either me or them ... I hadn't the strength to explain what is intuitive and categorical in me, the need to experience<sup>32</sup>



It was with this attitude that he hurled himself into active war, and died within six months of writing the letter. Like many other war poets of his generation, he perhaps had an instinctive feeling that the end was near, and that the tragic fact must be faced. His last significant poem 'The Jungle' grew out of this mood, and it seems to be his final poetic statement about life and war, or rather, 'Life and Death' as he had phrased it in his well-known letter to his wife, which Robert Graves quoted in his 'Foreword' to *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets*. The poem opens with the presentation of the jungle, apparently as a powerful symbol, and in the first section it is seen as both beautiful and corrupt. In the second section, the poet surveys life in the Western World, and enumerates its economic, social and cultural ills:

The weekly bribe we paid the man in black,  
The day shift sinking from the sun  
The blinding arc of rivets blown through steel,  
The patient queues, headlines and slogans flung  
Across a frightened continent, the town  
Sullen and out of work, the little home  
Semi-detached, suburban, transient  
As fever or the anger of the old,  
The best ones on some specious pretext gone.

In contrast to this, the life and values asserted in the jungle seem preferable—'the instinctive rightness' of the kingfisher is clearly a better choice than 'the banal rectitude of the states', the 'dew-bright diamonds on a viper's back' than 'the vituperations of the just':

But we who dream beside this jungle pool  
Prefer the instinctive rightness of the poised  
Pied kingfisher deep darting for a fish  
To all the banal rectitude of states,  
The dew-bright diamonds on a viper's back  
To the slow poison of a meaning lost  
And the vituperations of the just.

It is as if at the end of his journey, Lewis comes face to face with the fundamental realities of life. With the enlargement of his imagination and experience he discovers the irrelevance of the values that he had

imbibed and cherished as a youth. And now all the themes and attitudes that he had been trying to develop in his earlier poems have become secondary in importance. He becomes more and more concerned with the vast and the elemental. In the third section, he drops the symbol of the jungle, or at any rate relegates it to the background, and investigates the origins of man's troubles, and finds the truth within man himself:

And though the state has enemies we know  
The greater enmity within ourselves.

This, however, goes with a recognition of man's achievement, and his realisation of 'elemental love'. Lewis renders this splendidly with an almost perfect control over his verse:

Some things we cleaned like knives in earth,  
Kept from the dew and rust of Time  
Instinctive truths and elemental love,  
Knowing the force that brings the teal and quail  
From Turkestan across the Himalayan snows  
To Kashmir and the South alone can guide  
That winging wildness home again.

This, in a sense, might be taken as a statement—in memorable poetic terms—of Lewis's own effort to retain the integrity of his self in a world of crumbling walls, but unfortunately it also contains an admission of defeat. In fact, taking the section as a whole, one feels that man is viewed as a complex phenomenon, in whom the potentiality for both good and evil is present. Regrettably, he has been more evil than good—and the poet seeks forgiveness for 'this strange inconstancy of soul'—and as such he is pictured as completely alienated at the end of this section of the poem. This is conveyed through the powerful image of a face being distorted and strangled by leaves in the pool:

The face distorted in a jungle pool  
That drowns its image in a mort of leaves.

So that the final image with which the last section of the poem begins is that of man who finds himself lost in this world, 'anonymous,

unknown'. He is all alone, and all his hopes and dreams of achievement have fallen to pieces. Here one is reminded of Auden's poem 'September 1939', in which the poet finds himself in a situation analogous to that of Lewis in 'The Jungle':

...we are  
Lost in a haunted wood,  
Children afraid of the night  
Who have never been happy or good.

Auden too, like Lewis, traces the cause of man's unhappiness within himself, and relates it to his selfishness, and his misconception of the true meaning of love:

For the error bred in the bone  
Of each woman and each man  
Graves what it cannot have,  
Not universal love  
But to be loved alone.

But whereas Auden's poem ends on a positive note, 'we must love one another or die', and faith in an 'affirming flame', Lewis's poem sees death as the final release from all human struggles and failures. Though there is a faint suggestion that death might lead to a liberation of the soul, the final impression that the entire poem leads up to is one of utter resignation:

Or does the will's long struggle end  
With the last kindness of a foe or friend?

Anyone who kills him would be doing an act of kindness to him because death will put an end to the 'will's long struggle'.

The suspicion that Lewis did not envisage any possibilities through or beyond death is challenged by the symbolical implications of his brilliant short story 'Orange-Grove', which was one of the last he wrote. In that story, the officer, Beale, carried in his truck the corpse of the driver who had been murdered. But the truck broke down in the flooded paddy-fields, and Beale was assisted by some gypsies. They agreed to carry the dead body for him. But he did not know what they were going to do with the corpse, or, indeed, where they were going. The story ends with the following words which might

be interpreted to suggest some kind of spiritual redemption through self-abnegation:

He wished, though, that he knew where they were going. They only smiled and nodded when he asked. May be they weren't going anywhere much, except perhaps to some pasture, to some well.<sup>83</sup>

This is, if one insists on discovering one, Lewis's final 'vision'. But then, this 'vision' is not something that is sought and explored, and eventually achieved, through a series of poems. Hence it lacks solidity and conviction. To pick up a handful of his poems and to show that he was moving towards self-realisation through a negation of personal self, is to ignore the vast body of his poetry which bears evidence to his doubts about the way the facts of war could be reconciled with his own ideas about life. As we have seen, his poems deal with a variety of ideas and thoughts as they occurred to him. He was right, therefore, in describing his *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets* as 'Poems in Transit'. Most of his poems have, in their background at any rate, an apprehension of death, but death in his poetry does not have the terrible intensity that it has in the poetry of some of his fellow-poets. Thus, for instance, in contrast to Keith Douglas's concept that the fierceness of death reveals the true nature of human experience, or Sidney Keyes's search for death as a test of courage, Alun Lewis's longing is akin to a romantic wish for easeful death. His concept of death as putting an end to humdrum life is not so much a compelling vision as a sad commentary on his own life.

Lewis was perhaps the best critic of his works. A few months before he was killed, he was hoping that once he was able to leave the life of a migrant soldier and settle down in the stream of normal life, he would be able to crystallise his experience in order to produce 'serious and *continuous work*' (my italics):

But I hope I can breathe in crowds and in business when I return, for all these fields of human life—the greatest part of people's lives in fact—is scarcely known to me. I don't know whether I'll write much out here: one book, may be, in the end. But my most serious and continuous work must be for home.<sup>84</sup>

Here is an explicit statement from Lewis himself that he was not prepared to identify himself with the processes of war. He was physically

involved in it, but tried to free himself emotionally. Yet, the tragic fact was that he, like so many young men of his generation, was doomed to the reality of war, and was consumed by it. It is this ambivalent position of his that can explain, to a great extent, the unevenness and the impressionistic nature of his war poems.

Lewis had believed that the new and strange war experiences would help him to write better poetry and, in fact, he deliberately sought them. But, as Yeats has shown from his own example, poetry is born 'not out of the experiences which we go out to seek, but of those events which come upon us like waves'.<sup>85</sup> Stephen Spender made a similar point while discussing the role of an artist in times of war:

Yet the search for new experiences is futile, whether in art or in life. Everyone, even a child, is aware of pain, cruelty and violence, and the worst pain is only an extension of something easily imagined already. There are innumerable variations on experience, yet the fundamental experiences are very simple, being contained within the human mind and the human body and the relations of human beings with each other.<sup>86</sup>

Lewis evidently lacked the imaginative resources of a major poet, and relied too heavily on personal experiences. Unfortunately, his personal experiences were not always sufficiently intense or revealing. As a man who came to manhood during war-years, he did not have much personal experience of actual warfare. He never went into action, and his poetry is a record of the frustrations and abstract broodings of a waiting soldier.

This is not to deny the magnificent achievements of his isolated pieces, where he is able to give to his emotions the impersonality of great poetry. But, taken as a whole, his poetry does not seem to adequately reflect his characteristic poetic personality and promise. He apparently had a genius for writing compassionate poetry about human suffering and oppression and he had admirably expressed this belief in his letter to Robert Graves which has been quoted elsewhere. In that letter, Lewis had remarked: '...if I succeed (I use the word in no vulgar sense) I'll have helped to make the world gentler, more understanding, more beautiful therefore. I don't mind sweating my soul out for such an end.' He essentially wanted to be a poet of hope and joy, and constantly sought 'robustness in the core of sadness'.<sup>87</sup> But the war denied him the opportunity to write poetry on those

lines. He was aware of this threat, and had hoped that he would not succumb to it:

I've been reading Graham Green's *Brighton Rock* and I feel a sort of horror at the gusto with which so many modern writers portray the detailed disintegration and instability and bewilderment of modern humanity. I'd like to wait until I can get a stronger and more constructive purpose to guide my pen.<sup>38</sup>

But, unfortunately, his war experiences proved too much for him. They not only consumed him physically, but also rendered his poetic self impotent. He wrote to Keidrych Rhys and his wife:

I'm not writing anything nowadays—I have torn up a lot of half finished and half baked morbidities and wrestled vainly and wearily with unnecessary poems. . . . I find myself too haggard an interior to create and talk the essential equipoise and joy that I believe must exist in the act, of whatever nature it is.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, the following beautiful lines from 'The Jungle' might stand as a fitting epitaph for Alun Lewis, the man and the poet:

Only aloneness, swinging slowly  
Down the cold orbit of an older world  
Than any they predicted in the schools,  
Stirs the cold forest with a starry wind,  
And sudden as the flashing of a sword  
The dream exalts the bowed and golden head  
And time is swept with a great turbulence,  
The old temptation to remould the world.

Implied therein are the nobility of his idealism, the romantic nature of it to the extent that he was unable fully to translate it into poetic terms, and his tragic destiny.

## SIX

### *Sidney Keyes*

THE BOY WHO, at the age of five, rejected *The Children's Encyclopaedia* as inaccurate, and who grew up in isolation from other children, under the guidance of a stern grandfather, was perhaps destined to be a precocious but esoteric poet. Sidney Keyes lived in a world of myths, fables and heroes and the creative artist in him seldom came in contact with human beings. Early in his brief poetic career, he set himself to discover the 'Ultima Thule of Romanticism',<sup>1</sup> from where Yeats and Rilke had brought back only partial reports. Both by temperament and vocation he tended to be a lover of the visionary and the macabre. Among the numerous influences on him, Keyes's first biographer and editor Michael Meyer mentions the following:

Keyes's literary and artistic preferences are curiously significant. For direction and inspiration, he turned to such visionaries as El Greco, Blake, Holderlin, Schiller, Rilke, Yeats and Sibelius. At the same time, he found his emotional problems most completely resolved in the nineteenth-century school of haunted countrymen: Wordsworth, Clare, Van Gogh, Hardy and, later, Housman and Edward Thomas.... He loved the masters of the macabre; Donne, Webster, Goya, Beddoes, Dickens, Picasso, Klee, Rouault, Graham Greene; and such as came his way of the early German and Russian films.<sup>2</sup>

It is not at all surprising, then, that working under such formidable influences, Keyes started his poetic career by becoming extremely 'literary' and produced poetry that was 'intellectual', remote and often obscure. His subjects were pain, guilt and death, which he tackled in abstract and non-human terms, and, while still remaining on this level of abstraction, he attempted to face these problems with heroic defiance and obstinate hope. But, because of a basic lack of

human contact, neither the sense of pain nor that of defiance and hope is brought home to the reader with any degree of poetic conviction. In fact, after an initial impression of dazzling brilliance, one detects what Keyes himself had described as 'a vaguely bogus atmosphere'<sup>3</sup> in his poetry, whose technical short-comings seem to lie in verbal excesses, uncontrolled imagery and borrowed modes of expression.

It is likely that had the experiences of war-time Oxford as well as those of actual war not intervened, Keyes would have developed into a mystical or metaphysical poet. With greater maturity he might have tightened his verse and his vision might have become more austere, but he would perhaps have been less appealing than he is now. His years at Oxford broadened his human experience and, on a personal level, made him realise what it was to be in love. He fell in love with a German girl, Milein Cosmann, but the affair was both unhappy and unsatisfying. It was under the burden of this tortuous love relationship that he left Oxford to join the army, and encountered deeper human problems on a practical scale. Feelings of pain, separation, suffering and fear presented themselves to him in their stark reality, and as a poet he sought to deal with them in their own terms. It is for this reason that his later poems are real and effective in a way his earlier poems are not. Death and violence are faced in their starkness and immediacy now and, after this is done, the subsequent belief that the test of our victory is measured by the courage of our submission is conveyed with deep poetic conviction.

Sidney Arthur Kilworth Keyes was born in Dartford, Kent, on 27 May 1922. His mother died soon after his birth, and his father took only a sporadic interest in him. As a result, he was brought up by his grandfather, whose domineering, and often violent and tempestuous, personality left a lasting impression on him. He was sent to a kindergarten, but was mainly taught at home. He had little interest in games and sports, and with his imaginative and intellectual propensities devoured books of history and legend. He showed a keen interest in the natural world around him and, as Michael Meyer noted, displayed an uncanny capacity for becoming friends with animals, birds and reptiles. In 1933, he went to Dartford Grammar School, and in 1935 he took the Common Entrance Examination to Tonbridge, his father's school. Within three years he reached the History Sixth, and came in contact with the master, Tom Staveley, a poet who had received encouragement from Yeats. Staveley, in turn, directed the literary efforts of Sidney Keyes. By the time he reached his final



year at Tonbridge, Keyes had written about one hundred poems. He also wrote an allegorical story, 'The Albatross', as a form task at Tonbridge, and in the spring of 1940 he wrote two plays, 'Hosea' (a short two-part play, a kind of modern morality), and 'Minos of Crete' in three acts and an Epilogue.

In October 1940, he entered Queen's College, Oxford, and soon made friends with fellow-poets like Drummond Allison and John Heath-Stubbs. Another friend, Michael Meyer, who was to become his biographer and editor, introduced him to the university magazine *Cherwell*, of which Meyer was then one of the editors. If one goes through the various issues of the magazine, from the time Keyes entered Oxford (October 1940) until he left it (April 1942), one realises how active he was in the literary and cultural life of the university. He not only wrote poems and short stories for it, but also participated in its critical controversies. In addition to all this, he reviewed books, plays and concerts. On 21 May 1941, he became one of the editors of *Cherwell*. In the same year he edited, in collaboration with Michael Meyer, *Eight Oxford Poets* and wrote a foreword for it. He again took the role of a spokesman for the younger generation of writers when he wrote about the artist's role in society in an article, 'The Artist in Society', for a collection of essays which Percy Colson had edited under the title *The Future of Artists*. Throughout his stay in Oxford, Keyes wrote a number of poems, and by the end of 1941 he had written enough to form a volume. They were collected under the title *The Iron Laurel*, published by Routledge in 1942.

On 18 June 1941, Keyes enlisted in the Royal Fusiliers, but was relegated to the Army Reserve. He was called up for active duty in the middle of the term on 8 April 1942, and was sent to Northern Ireland for infantry training. During his training period he was posted at Omagh, Dunbar and Dovercourt, yet found time to write poems, sufficient to form another volume, which appeared posthumously in 1944 under the title *The Cruel Solstice*. After the completion of his training, he wanted to be transferred to the Intelligence Corps but was appointed instead to a Regular Army Emergency Commission in the Queen's Own (Royal West Kent) Regiment. His Regiment was sent to North Africa. He saw active service for only two weeks, was taken prisoner during the last days of the Tunisian campaign, and died from 'unknown causes' on 29 April 1943 while in enemy hands.

The most astonishing thing about the hundred or so poems that Keyes wrote while still at school is that they were written by a boy so young. As might be expected, most of them were conventional pieces, written in second-hand language, heavily influenced by Shelley, Keats and the later Victorians. But in some other more successful poems of this period one can find traces of the mind, the attitude and even the technique which marked the mature poems of his later years. Perhaps because of his isolated and unhappy childhood, dominated by a tempestuous grandfather, he tended to build up an inner world. This inner world was not one of idle fantasy, but rather of evil destiny. Thus, a tragic concept of life, with only an intellectual grasp of it, became the keynote of his personality. Pain, suffering and death were the central themes of his poetry, but they remained curiously remote and baroque. It is because he never seems to have felt such emotions on a personal or human level that some of the most painful—or what one would imagine *should* be the most painful—poems leave the reader surprisingly unscathed. It is only on a few occasions, as in 'Elegy', that his treatment of death marks the poet out as distinct from those whose juvenalia are characterised by adolescent brooding and tearful melancholy. 'Elegy' is a tightly constructed poem in which he makes fastidious use of words, a skilful use of rhyme and repetition, and also displays his capacity for vivid sketches:

April again, and it is a year again  
Since you walked out and slammed the door  
Leaving us tangled in your words. Your brain  
Lives in the bank-book, and your eyes look up  
Laughing from the carpet on the floor:  
And we still drink from your silver cup.

The concept of time is enlarged here to contain not only its sense of destruction but also the process of continuity—'And we still drink from your silver cup.' There is also a determination that the rolling years would not be allowed to wipe out personal loyalties:

We shall never forget nor escape you, nor make terms  
With your enemies, the swift departing years.

Here a personally felt emotion of grief (over his grandfather's death) gives a certain solidity to the poem. But whenever Keyes writes

impersonally, he tends to be abstract. Thus in 'Prospero', Death is viewed as a 'fellow-sorcerer' of Prospero, who himself is 'a disembodied mind', and the poem bristles with borrowed images like 'mandrake-root', 'wolf's-bane' and 'hemlock'.

Keyes was also an extremely 'intellectual' poet, and this fact is often manifested in his rather abstruse descriptions. For instance, he clearly delights in cleverness while seeking to describe the Greenwich Observatory in the poem of that title:

This onion-dome holds all intricacies  
Of intellect and star-struck wisdom; so  
Like Coleridge's head with multitudinous  
Passages riddled, full of strange instruments  
Unbalanced by a touch, this organism  
From wires and dials spins introverted life.

Or, again, in 'The Buzzard', he constructs a geometrical pattern in words, before contrasting the extended human comprehension with the narrow apprehension of the buzzard:

Life swings on its axis  
In motion centripetal to this sphere  
Or dust under the burning-glass of sky:  
This noontide motion spins a kind of peace.  
Thoughts nuzzle too the crystalline  
Walls of the curving brain and gape their message  
Dumbly and flounce away.

What one must note here is that Keyes is burdened by a conscious intellectuality, which he finds hard to subdue for purposes of poetic concentration and intensity. This remained his problem for a long time because later on, as a result of his wider readings in English and foreign literatures (he was well-versed in French and German), his literariness seemed to interfere with his more direct poetic intuition. And the impression remains, to the end, that his intellectual maturity far outclassed his emotional growth.

The last poem that he wrote before he went to Oxford is called 'Cervières', and it is the first of his poems to deal with the war. Its subjects are air-raids and threatened invasions, and the setting a cherry orchard. It is reasonable to suppose that it had something to do with

the incident in his family orchard at St. Leonard's, where the gardener was shot down by a low-flying plane. In this poem Keyes addresses two French children, Aimée and Victor—probably his friends during his holiday in France in July 1939—and tells them that the birds have taken away all the cherries, and warns them:

Soon an invader will be taking more than cherries:  
They'll be stealing our dreams or breaking up  
Our history for firewood.

He goes on to build a picture of destruction and ruin—with images like 'avenues of cherry trees are broken/And trampled boughs crawl in the dust'—only to come out with a Shelleyan assurance of regeneration:

Yet somewhere—O beyond what bitter ranges?—  
A seed drops from the sky and like a bomb  
Explodes into our orchard's progeny,  
And so our care may colonize a desert.  
They cannot break our trees or waste our dreams,  
For their despoiling is a kind of sowing.

But cracks soon appeared in his world of dreams. His first poem on entering Oxford is called 'Remember Your Lovers', which he wrote in an examination hall after finishing his paper. The poem is carelessly and hastily written as is evident from expressions like 'When you foresaw with vision prescient', but it is important in so far as it shows his awareness of war as an instrument that destroys human love, and at the same time brings the soldier face to face with 'death's unquenchable wisdom'. Though war was by no means the central theme of his poetry during his stay at Oxford, it hovered in the background all the time. Thus, in 'Advice For a Journey', he expresses the need to be prepared for war:

The drums mutter for war and soon we must begin  
To seek the country where they say that joy  
Springs flowerlike among the rocks, to win  
The fabulous golden mountain of our peace.

But this goes with an unsentimental realisation that what war actually holds forth is neither joy nor peace, but suffering and despair:

So take no rations, remember not your homes  
 Only the blind and stubborn hope to track  
 This wilderness. The thoughtful leave their bones  
 In windy foodless meadows of despair.

Yet, characteristically enough, the poem ends with a note of defiance, so that the passion for life comes out as strongly as feelings of disillusionment:

Go forth, my friends, the raven is no sibyl;  
 Break the clouds' anger with your unchanged faces.  
 You'll find, maybe, the dream under the hill—  
 But never Canaan, nor any golden mountain.

Instead of seeing war as accidental, Keyes views it as part of the vast tragic pattern of life. In 'Europe's Prisoners', both the prisoners and the escapees are doomed to the same fate:

The ones who took to garrets and consumption  
 In foreign cities, found a deeper dungeon  
 Than any Dachau. Free but still confined  
 The human lack of pity split their mind.

The cause of suffering is traced inside man, in his lack of human pity, and the poet's advice is to encounter the reality of pain, which must be overcome before any strength can be achieved:

Whatever days, whatever seasons pass,  
 The prisoners must stare in pain's white face:  
 Until at last the courage they have learned  
 Shall burst the walls and overturn the world.

He looks across the Atlantic and has the premonition that the Americans too would be engulfed in the tragedy of war—the poem 'Neutrality' was written only five months before the Americans entered the war—and Keyes speaks for them:

We are no cowards, we are pictures  
 Of ordinary people, as you once were.  
 Blame not nor pity us; we are the people  
 Who laugh in dreams before the romping boar  
 Appears, before the loved one's death.

These poems about the lurking rather than actual dangers of war reflect the spirit of undergraduates at Oxford during these times—the Oxford which still allowed them to go their own ways before they were called up for service. Sidney Keyes certainly went his own way, and in fact confirmed and strengthened his earlier poetic attitudes. Michael Meyer noted that 'hitherto (i.e., until Keyes went up to Oxford) Keyes had, perhaps inevitably, found deepest satisfaction in the Romantic poets (1780-1830) with their preoccupation with death and the macabre.'<sup>4</sup> Keyes himself had said that, as a poet, he had set before himself a romantic ideal. In a letter to Richard Church he pointed out:

As to the question of my symbolism: the best clue that I can give you is to say that I believe the greatest and most influential poets in the last 100 years or so to be Yeats and Rilke. These two brought back reports from a kind of Ultima Thule of Romanticism, which suggest that there is even more—much more—to be discovered there: and the starting point of my quest is therefore an attempt to synthesize this information.<sup>5</sup>

Keyes's romanticism was not an isolated phenomenon, but was part of a general reaction against the socio-ethical poetry of the thirties. In his second poem written in Oxford we find the poet, 'misery's son', wandering bewildered in a sour land. The setting of the poem is Stanton Harcourt in Oxfordshire, where Pope completed the fifth book of his *Iliad*. Keyes fuses Pope's disillusionments with the atmosphere of the sour land, which is evoked with romantic sensitivity:

The houses are white stone in this country,  
Windowless and blind as leprosy;  
No peace for the wanderer waiting only death.  
Plovers crouch in the rain between the furrows  
Or wheel club-winged and tumble across the wind;  
A land so dead ghosts lodge not  
Along its borders to torment the mind.

("Sour Land")

Though Keyes had written a few 'romantic' love poems like 'Two Variations' in which he seemed to be wearily in love with love itself, his meeting Mlein Cosmann in May 1941 resulted in poems of

passionate love. 'Poem For Milein Cosmann', which he wrote almost immediately after meeting her, testifies to his revival of spirits and personally-felt joy and happiness, which are conveyed with simplicity through images taken from direct observation of nature. Similarly, in two other poems, 'For M.C. Written in the Train' and 'Poem for Milein About the Mechanical Bird', there is great joy at the awakening of passionate love. These poems are significant for the fact that they bear evidence of the poet's participation in human activities. However, Keyes's interest in the supernatural, which was first expressed in boyhood stories and poems, deepened during his stay in Oxford. While reviewing Christian Hole's *Haunted England for Cherwell*, he remarked:

The chief issue now seems to be not whether one believes in ghosts, but what justification can be found for their existence. This book can give no solutions, and leads one deeper into perplexity. But those who can read it for entertainment will enjoy a fine feast of horrors.... This book is for the marvellers and the thoughtful, but not for the sophisticated.<sup>6</sup>

Keyes obviously regarded himself as being among the marvellers and the thoughtful rather than the sophisticated. He went with John Heath-Stubbs to a spiritual seance in one of the colleges, and was greatly impressed by the experience. He also visited a Jacobean cottage on the grounds of Queen's College. The cottage was supposed to be haunted, and passing by it one night he felt a sudden and unaccountable chill. Out of this experience came his poem 'The Little Drawda', which is reminiscent of Edith Sitwell's 'The Little Ghost Who Died For Love'. Keyes's poem demonstrates his ability not only to conjure up a ghost but also to identify himself with it. The ghost is disturbed, rejected and lonely and, interestingly enough, Keyes thinks that the condition of the ghost is essential for the discovery of 'the secret of living':

On this strong night, remain you lonely  
Seeker beside me, though my heart is dumb:  
We may together solve the unexpected  
Secret of living, now that the clock is dumb.

His identification of his own quest with that of the ghost defines the nature of the search. Keyes was always looking for a spiritual meaning,

and this often led him to reject the rational and materialistic world and adopt an attitude of reverence for the irrational and the supernatural.

Keyes's love for the physically non-existent fired his historical imagination, and he vividly recreated heroes of history and literature, myth and legend. He was fascinated by the sea-god Glaucus in the poem of that title, and the dead and gone supernatural beings of Scandinavian mythology in 'Troll Kings'. In the poem 'Paul Klee', which he wrote after visiting the Klee exhibition in London, he tried to enter the German expressionist painter's mind through his works. But, obviously, literary figures held a special appeal for Keyes. In a brilliant sonnet, 'William Wordsworth', he seems to have caught the true spirit of the older poet in a few striking phrases. What prevented Keyes from becoming a good dramatist enabled him to present vivid portraits of men and women. His conception of character was static and Theophrastian. Though he had difficulty in revealing various facets of character through a series of dramatic actions, he captured a few selected, and significant, aspects in memorable lines. Wordsworth's strong poetic personality, which retained a sense of strength in spite of the 'still sad music of humanity', has been evoked in the following lines of austere dignity:

He was a stormy day, a granite peak  
 Spearing the sky; and look, about its base  
 Words flower like crocuses in the hanging woods,  
 Blank though the dalehead and the bony face.

And his tribute to Virginia Woolf in 'Elegy For Mrs. Virginia Woolf' has been extended into a lament for all the victims of war and air-raids. Keyes sees her as a victim of war, who is now free from its cruelties:

Lie low, sleep well, safe from the rabid winds  
 Of war and argument, our hierarchies and powers.

The different kinds of poems that he wrote show not only Keyes's breadth of interest but also mastery of poetic techniques. At the same time, it must be emphasised that, with the passage of time, he seems to have concentrated on themes of pain and suffering. In the first place, he was beginning to feel that an artist's life involved



frustration and suffering. In 'The Ploughman' he likened the modern poet to the disinherited and dispossessed ploughman of nineteenth-century industrialised England. He universalised the picture in 'The Bards', where the ancient Celtic blind minstrels sing in 'their raftered halls, Hung with hard holly', in 'great palaces, Decked with the pale and sickled mistletoe'. Though the precision and diction of Keyes's lines might bring to one's mind Robert Graves's poem of the same title, the basic image of the bard as a suffering but visionary and proud sage comes, perhaps, from Thomas Gray:

Sing, blinded face; quick hands in darkness groping  
 Pluck the sad harp; sad heart forever hoping  
 Valhalla may be songless, enter  
 The moment of your glory, out of clamour  
 Moulding your vision to such harmony  
 That drunken heroes cannot choose but honour  
 Your stubborn blinded pride, your inward winter.

The bards have traditionally mustered 'the shards of pain to harmony', and that was what Keyes himself tried to do in his own poetry. Pain and the need for its acceptance have been central to his poetry. In *Mimos of Crete*, he had sought to present a character who did not break down under suffering, but rather progressed through it. He deals with the theme of pain in a different way in 'Gilles de Retz'. Gilles de Retz was a famous captain who fought with Joan of Arc in the Battle of Orleans in 1429 and again at the siege of Paris, and was made Marshal of France at the age of twenty-five. Thereafter, for eight years, before he was publicly condemned and hanged, he murdered about 140 children in an effort to make a pact with the devil. Keyes was fascinated by the perversions of this man, and in his eyes Gilles de Retz's enormous crimes invested him with a strange kind of splendour. In the poem, he tries to understand the structure of such a mind, and feels both awe and compassion. (He could not see the minutes of the trial which were translated from Latin to French and were published in Paris in 1965—they show that both the judge and the crowd came to pity the perverted hero.)<sup>7</sup>

G. S. Fraser,<sup>8</sup> who has analysed this poem at some length, remarks:

For him (Keyes) these crimes of Gilles have a perverted religious motive, they are a sort of blasphemous attempt to bridge the terrible

gap between man and God. Estranged as he feels from the love of God, Gilles wishes to experience at least the presence of God as wrath,

pure divine anger  
Piercing your safety like a lancet, or perhaps  
A flat knife working for years behind the eyes,  
Distorting vision....

Estranged, he seeks to imitate, or it would be truer to say, *parody* God. Pain is as near as he can get to an absolute, it is his parody of absolute love.

Keyes himself had made a similar point while reviewing Charles William's *Witchcraft*, (which, incidentally, was one of the sources of his information about Gilles de Retz):

Mr. Williams treats witchcraft as a mystical perversion, an inverted Christianity: for, does it not thrive upon just these qualities which Christianity tends to suppress—personal pride, malice, exhibitionism? Furthermore, it fulfils the instinctive demand of the human soul for logic, order, a happy ending.<sup>9</sup>

In the poem Keyes deals with his subject with a frigid detachment, an attitude which alone could prevent the poem from becoming obscene and sensational. In fact, it was his detached stance that also enabled him to look at his subject with some degree of sympathetic understanding. He could get into the skin of Gilles and project his (Gilles's) unusual concepts of love and pain:

See  
How I believed in pain, how near I got  
To living pain, regaining my lost image  
Of hard perfection, sexless and immortal.  
Nearer than you to living love, to knowing  
The community of love without giving or taking  
Or ceasing or the need of change. At least  
I knew this in my commonwealth of pain,  
You, knowing neither, burn me and fear my agony  
And never learn any better kind of love.

The poem, however, ends with the hero repenting of his 'misdirected worship', and feeling that he does not even deserve to see the cross

or receive divine forgiveness. But the poet has remarkably succeeded in laying bare the workings of an extraordinarily perverted mind, in a kind of Browningsque monologue. It is true, as Fraser notes, that the poem is less moving on a human level, because in his metaphysical idealism Keyes thought that 'there is a kind of real pain, more important than actual pain'. But perhaps this was the only way Keyes could explain the senseless atrocities on the part of Gilles, who was at the same time a distinguished soldier. The poet was merely interested in exploring such a mind. He obviously did not endorse Gilles's action. In his review of Charles Williams's book, he had condemned the use of witchcraft by Gilles 'from sheer pride and immodest curiosity', but had gone on to admire Williams's book, 'for it is a study of a spiritual disease which has been chronic among the human race, and which today shows many signs of reappearance'. Evidently, Keyes viewed his own study of Gilles in some such light, and perhaps this could have been one of the ways of looking at Hitler.

However, the real importance of 'Gilles de Retz' in the poetic development of Keyes lies in the fact that the poet was trying to understand the nature of pain. If the concept of pain here is metaphysical, there is evidence that he was constantly trying to subdue his 'overcurious mind' in order to respond to more human emotions and values. The poem 'All Souls: A Dialogue' is a sequence of six short poems in which the poet engages in a dialogue with himself and three friends. He had planned a sequence of sonnets in imitation of Rilke's 'Sonnets to Orpheus', and the present set of poems is part of it. He had abandoned the plan as such because he found the sonnet form cramping, 'as if I had shut myself up in a number of little boxes'.<sup>10</sup> In spite of some fuzzy descriptions and disconnected sequences, the central theme of the poem is fairly clear. The poet wanders in the contemporary wasteland, and, faced with transience, pain and death, tries to accept them through love for other persons, in this case John Heath-Stubbs and Drummond Allison. In the first section, where he addresses Heath-Stubbs, he asks him not to be 'beguiled' by the autumn birds or dew in fields. He warns him that:

Nature has plans against your peace of mind--  
You must be cunning with her. When the wind  
Cries like a child, sit behind bolted doors.

In another section, the poet expresses his failures and frustrations and seeks salvation in love. But it is in the last section, where he

addresses Drummond Allison, that he speaks of the temporary nature of all earthly memorials, and, like Alun Lewis, finds more permanent value in 'winning the warm hearts around us'. Keyes conveys this in lines of simplicity and dignity, reflecting a spirit of defiance as well as that of serene acceptance:

So let's not advertise the immemorial  
Autumn of flesh; let's cheat the easy provers  
Of history's malice, build in human rooms  
Our fame, in falling hearts our vast escorial.

Keyes's love poems too of this period, like 'Lover's Complaint' and 'The Migrant', deal with pain on a more 'human' level. Together with his personal disappointment in love, Keyes was confronted by threats of war, which were becoming more immediate. That sense of immediacy is conveyed with telling force in poems like 'Time Will Not Grant' and 'The Cruel Solstice'. Like Douglas, Keyes had an uneasy certainty that, because of war-conditions, he would not be able to fulfil his poetic mission in this life:

Time will not grant the unlined page  
Completion or the hand respite.

He realised that poets of past ages, like Donne and Rilke, had the strength and courage to write great poetry against all odds, but in his own case he felt that time was overwhelmingly against him:

Fear was Donne's peace; to him,  
Charted between the minstrel cherubim,  
Terror was decent. Rilke tenderly  
Accepted autumn like a rooted tree,  
But I am frightened after every good day  
That all my life must change and fall away.

(*'Time Will Not Grant'*)

The quality that Keyes admired in Rilke—acceptance—was becoming rather elusive for him. All he foresaw was chaos and destruction:

I see a black time coming, history  
Tending in footnotes our forgotten land.

(*'The Island City'*)

This mood of despair found expression in most poignant and moving terms in the poem 'The Cruel Solstice' which, prophetically enough, gave the title to his second volume of poems which appeared posthumously. The opening stanza of the poem creates the feeling of despair, with images of a cold, dark night in a strange city:

To-night the stranger city and the old  
Moon that stands over it proclaim  
A cruel solstice, coming ice and cold  
Thoughts and the darkening of the heart's flame.

The soul's importunities to 'stand up' seem a mockery in the face of his utter helplessness. Even love cannot offer a sustaining value, it can only give him tender memories:

So must I walk or falter by the wall  
Wondering at my impotence  
Of thought and action; at the fall  
Of love and cities and the heart's false diligence.

To-night I cannot speak, remembering  
For all my daily talk, I dare not enter  
The empty month; can only stand and think  
Of you, my dearest, and the approaching winter.

His personal feelings did not warrant any hope in the chaotic world, but Keyes was too strong a poetic personality to be completely swept off by 'the approaching winter'. An alternative value had to be found, a meaning had to be discovered in this apparently meaningless chaos. Here his 'literariness' came to his aid. He realised that the earlier poets, especially Rilke, were able to solve their problems courageously, and he was determined to do likewise. Just before leaving Oxford for military training, he wrote a long poem called 'The Foreign Gate' in March 1942. Although his volume *The Iron Laurel* was in press, he asked his publisher to hold it up until he could submit the new poem for inclusion.

Keyes's imminent enlistment made him aware of the possibility of his own death, and 'The Foreign Gate' deals with that possibility. Speaking of this poem, Michael Meyer observes: 'Here, for the first time in his poetry, Death appears as a real presence. The only victory

lies in courageous submission.<sup>11</sup> But G. S. Fraser sees with deeper perceptiveness, though with less accurate biographical information about the poet, that 'though it ("The Foreign Gate") was written by a poet on active service, it might have been written as easily by a student among books'.<sup>12</sup> The poem was indeed written, both literally as well as metaphorically, 'by a student among books'. It was as if Keyes was making one last desperate effort to mould this gross world of physical experience with the refinement of an academic mind. The poem bears traces of various literary influences, the predominant one being that of Rilke, whose lines form the epigram to the poem.

It is concerned with the death in battle of heroes of past and present generations, and attempts a philosophical elegy for them. The poet tries to explore the nature of the sacrifice and to wring some significance out of it. The poem has parts that are incantatory and hortatory and they do not tie up very well. However, it is clear that Keyes is viewing death as the 'foreign gate' through which the soldiers must pass, and pass into eternity. In the first section of the poem he invokes the dead soldiers of the past and addresses them as 'my brothers'. They come back to speak of their consciousness of loss:

Give back the days  
Of love's high summer even; with the calling  
Birds in the woodland; glimmer on the stream  
Of eddy and of oar-splash; roads as grey  
As evening; give back the sunburnt face,  
The easy manners, and the trodden grass  
Under the hedge. these things are not enough.  
The lovers weep. There is no rest or pity.  
There is no summer in that landlocked city. . . .

and of their sufferings in wars:

'My mouth speaks  
Terror and truth, instead of hard command.'  
'Remember the torn lace, the fine coats slashed  
With steel instead of velvet. Kunersdorf  
Fought in the shallow sand was my relief.'  
'I rode to Naseby' . . . 'And the barren land  
Of Tannenberg drank me. Remember now  
The grey and jointed corpses in the snow,

The struggle in the drift, the numb hands freezing  
 Into the bitter iron. . .'

'At Dunkirk I

Rolled in the shallows, and the living trod  
 Across me for a bridge. . . .'

But in their loss, suffering, pain and death, Keyes sees triumph and glory. The theme of pain—and the need for its acceptance—which runs throughout his poems now finds a more pointed expression:

A soldier's death is hard,  
 There's no prescribed or easy word  
 For dissolution in the Army books.  
 The uniform of pain with pain put on is straiter  
 Than any lover's garment; yet the death  
 Of these is different, and their glory greater.

But already, because of his wider experiences, Keyes goes beyond this prescription of pain, and connects the outer war with the 'inner war' within an individual:

Speak out the word and drape the drum and spare  
 The captive brain, the feet that walk to war  
 The ironbound brain, the hand unskilled in war  
 The shrinking brain, sick of an inner war.

War, in this sense, enables the soldiers who have 'ironbound brain(s)' and 'hand(s) unskilled in war' to come to terms with their own ignorance, fear and 'inner war'. Thus Keyes is holding not only the politicians, but also the public in general, responsible for the colossal hecatomb of war. And it is only by doing penance, in the shape of death, that the soldiers can achieve redemption:

Death tried many  
 Ways to invade their citadel of mind,  
 Always in vain; until the mortal hour  
 When they at last let down the bridge and flung  
 The gates apart, but left no easy plunder.  
 A greater victory lay in that surrender.

Death, looked at in this way, becomes part of the total scheme of things, and unless man passes through this experience his soul remains confined and 'he must walk alone':

The great have come home and the troubled spirits have spoken:  
But help or hope is none till the circle be broken  
Of wishing death and living time's compulsion,  
Of wishing love and living love's destruction.  
Till then, the soul is caged in brain and bone  
And the observant man must walk alone.

The poem concludes with images of chaos and confusion, representing the doubts and hesitations which must assail the human mind. But the poet derives strength and hope from the 'stone faces' (symbolising perhaps the examples of great men in the past):

It is well to remember the stone faces  
Among these ruins.

It was in such a frame of mind that Keyes joined the army in April 1942. Though the poems that he wrote after this date show that he was beginning to link his abstract thinking more clearly with actual living, his approach as a poet remained essentially 'literary'. He was still too impersonal a poet to abandon himself completely to new experiences. Rather, his highly literary mind sought to discover something familiar in those experiences. Unlike Wilfred Owen, who discovered the pity of war out of his personal war experiences, Keyes had foresuffered it all. So that when he actually went to war, his academic mind tried to impose its pattern on his experiences. Only a couple of weeks after his going to Omagh for military training, he wrote to John Heath-Stubbs about the paradox that he discovered in army life. He described 'the vision of the army', as it struck him, as:

Cold, obscenity, tiredness, an occasional sense of peace greater than any I have known before, and flashes of startling beauty.<sup>13</sup>

And Michael Meyer has noted that, later on 'in Africa, Keyes found a serenity which had never been his in England: a peace paradoxically arising from actual violence.'<sup>14</sup> Thus, one can say, with some



justification, that both in his life and poetry Keyes tried to conquer pain and arrive at a serene acceptance of it.

But, apparently, Keyes did not achieve this condition overnight. He struggled hard, and at times seemed to capitulate before the ghastliness of war, yet eventually came out with a sense of strength. His poems written in 1942 are a record of this history, and it has been rendered in eloquent and convincing poetic terms. The important point about them is that they affect us as human and real in a way his earlier poems do not. The 'literary' element is there no doubt, but it is no longer an isolated entity wandering in thin air; it has its roots in human experience. In other words, his literariness, now in contact with actuality, achieved a firmness and a solidity.

Keyes's army poems are subjective, and their personal tone is refreshing in contrast to the abstract broodings of his earlier poems. In March 1942, only a month before he was called up for service, he wrote nine poems which deal with his varying moods, reflecting the uncertain future that lay ahead. In a moment of confidence and joy, he wrote extravagantly of his love in a poem called 'Hopes for a Lover', which dazzles with its colourful imagery, and gay, jaunty rhythms:

I'd have you proud as red brocade  
And such a sight as Venus made  
Extravagantly stepping from a shell.

But this was a temporary mood which soon gave way to lover's feelings of frustration and regret in 'Lament for Harpischord: The Flowering Orchard'. In 'War Poet', Keyes expressed the contradiction that he encountered in life: 'I am the man who looked for peace and found/ My own eyes barbed.' The poem 'Anarchy', which has been described as his spiritual autobiography, depicts the turbulence of his mind, balanced only by his fearlessness and courage.

Keyes had a great fear that war would coarsen his mind. His first poem after he joined military service is full of dark forebodings and black imagery:

Rain strikes the window. Miles of wire  
Are hung with small mad eyes. Night sets its mask  
Upon the fissured hill. The soldier waits  
For sleep's deception, praying thus: O land

Of battle and the rough marauders lying  
 Under this country, spare me from my mind.  
 This year is blackened; as your faces blackened  
 Turn to bedrock, let me not be rotted. .

(‘Ulster Soldier’)

In reply to this poignant prayer ‘The wind cries through the valley’, and the soldier knows that he is doomed. But he also chooses to believe that ‘It’s only love could save him from his mind’. This poem reminds one of Alun Lewis’s ‘All Day it has Rained’, but Keyes’s treatment of the subject is entirely individualistic. He does not indulge, as Lewis does, in a gentle jibe at ‘the loud celebrities/Exhorting us to slaughter’, and a general nostalgia for the familiar native landscape. His poem, on the other hand, is one of apprehension and prayer. More importantly, it recognises the hesitations and doubts that a sensitive mind can arouse in a soldier:

we know the same  
 Perplexities and terrors—whether to turn back  
 On the dark road, whether to love  
 Too much and lose our power, or die of pride:  
 The fear of steel, or that the dead should mock us—  
 These trouble our proud race.

Yet, paradoxically enough, it was his mind which enabled him to remain sane amidst war’s carnage and to preserve his values. In a letter to Milein, he observed:

‘I am not a man but a voice. My only justification is my power of speaking clearly. Therefore, it doesn’t matter in the least what happens to my body. . . .’ All of which is true enough, but dangerous if one is not watchful: it might easily mean submission and not what I intend—the conquest of the physical world by acceptance.<sup>15</sup>

By this time, Keyes had started to discover that love was becoming a source of pain to him; it was no longer the agony of separation so much as the hopelessness of unrequited love. Milein did not give him the slightest encouragement. On the contrary she did not meet him when he came to Oxford and London on a brief leave in July. He was all along hoping that he would meet her, and when he received

her letter telling him that that would be impossible, he was numbed. He wrote to Michael Meyer:

The passionate need I felt. . . for three months has suddenly stopped as if a string had snapped, or a muscle that gave me pain had parted.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, he tried to contact her again and wrote a few letters, but without success. Along with one of his letters, he sent her a copy of the book *The Iron Laurel* with an inscription, 'To the Mad Lady From a Proud Talker. July 1942', which was the title of one of his poems, in which the lady tells the lover that she has changed and that the former relationship is no longer possible. He enclosed the poem 'Not Chosen' with another letter to her. This poem is in a low key, and it expresses the feeling that love will bring unhappiness to both:

I am the watcher in the narrow lane—  
My tongue is schooled in every word of fear.  
O take me back, but as you take remember  
My love will bring you nothing but trouble, my dear.

In the last poem that he wrote about her, 'North Sea', he looks back at this relationship with regret. It is a compact poem in which the lines and the images are controlled and precise. The central emotion of personal pain has been delicately balanced in a larger, universal context. He looks at the North Sea, and various figures appear in his mind. He is particularly sensitive to 'Heine's ghost', and is reminded of the German poet's failures and frustrations. As if to suggest that this is the common lot of all poets, Keyes passes on to his own sorrow:

And eastward looking, eastward wondering  
I meet the eyes of Heine's ghost, who saw  
His failure in the grey forsaken waves  
At Rulenstein one autumn. And between  
Rises the shape in more than memory  
Of Dusseldorf, the ringing, river-enfolding  
City that brought such sorrow on us both.

Dusseldorf was a city of sorrow for both of them because it was from there that she was exiled due to Nazi tyrannies; and because he was

to fall hopelessly in love with this girl from that city. After the termination of this episode with Milein, Keyes turned to her roommate Renée-Jane Scott, in whom he found an agreeable companion. He kept in touch with her and, when together, they used to go for walks. Though he could never forget Milein completely, his companionship with Renée gave him much pleasure, and a sense of stability. He wrote at least two poems for her—'Seascape' and 'The Promised Landscape'. The latter poem contains a touching lyrical tribute to her friendship and love:

How dare I sing for you  
 I the least worthy  
 Of lovers you've had:  
 You the most lovely  
 Of possible landscapes?

Renée's love obviously had a calming effect on him after the agony and hopelessness of his passionate love for Milein. But during the last months of his life he was more and more haunted by the pain and suffering in the world outside. As he remarked, 'the only difference is that now I am haunted by the chaos of the outer world, more than by my own personal world.'<sup>17</sup> The chaos of the outer world was, of course, the war-ridden time, when love had departed:

There is no speech to tell the shape of love  
 Nor any but the wounded eye to see it;  
 Whether in memory, or listening to the talk  
 Of rain among the gutters; or at dawn  
 The sentry's feet striking the chilly yard,  
 There is no synonym for love's great word  
 ('The Uncreated Images')

He takes images from nature in 'The Vines Are Planted' to indicate man's own responsibility for the kind of world in which he finds himself:

The hand is writing, but the page is bare.  
 We are unthrifty vintners. We have raised  
 Great rootless gardens from our impotence  
 To challenge this unlovely season's envy:

So now they bloom across the bitter wind  
Like the immortal spurge, the tempest's enemy.

But Keyes was far from picking on his generation as a special case. As a student of history, he knew that peoples and countries in the past had brought upon themselves suffering and destruction. 'Rome Remember' displays his brilliant historical imagination as he reminds the holy city of its tragic fate in the past:

Remember the Greeks who measured out your doom.  
Remember the soft funereal Etruscans. . . . .  
Remember the Nordic snarl and the African sorrow.

Speaking about this poem to Renée, he had said: 'I have begun to write a poem which is still another lament—for Rome and Carthage, for poetry and learning. . . .'<sup>18</sup> The lament is accompanied by a warning of the coming dangers, which is given in ringing admonitory tones:

The bronze wolf howls when the moon turns red.  
The trolls are massing for their last assault.  
Your dreams are full of claws and scaly faces  
And the Gothic arrow is pointed at your heart.

G. S. Fraser<sup>19</sup> has remarked on the technical maturity that Keyes had achieved in his later poems, and has quoted lines from 'Rome Remember' to demonstrate how skilful and supple Keyes's blank-verse had become. Indeed, this is one of the few perfect poems that he wrote, and its verse has not only lyrical surge and sonorous majesty, but also an epic sweep which is in perfect keeping with the theme of lament and warning. The poem is important in another sense as showing Keyes's ability to relate history to problems of contemporary living. It is reasonable to suppose that the 'outer chaos' around him fired Keyes's historical imagination in this poem, giving it its war-like theme.

But, interestingly, Keyes was equally capable of investing a modern figure with the stature of a hero in history. The poem 'Timoshenko' is about a Russian general, who was not far removed in time—his recent victory over the Germans had received wide publicity in newspapers in 1942, when the poem was composed. Yet, in the poem he seems as far removed as, say, Gilles de Retz was in Keyes's earlier

poem about him. But, as before, Keyes has no difficulty in getting into the mind of the Russian, who looked at the 'army of twisted limbs and hollow faces' and was grieved to think of the devastations, especially those caused at home, of war: .

And there before the night, he was aware  
Of the flayed fields of home, and black with ruin  
The helpful earth under the tracks of tanks.

This filled him with anger at the same time These contradictory feelings of grief over suffering and anger that led him to wage war and thereby cause more destruction, were perhaps typical of the people who were faced with Nazi aggression. Keyes embodied this paradox in memorable lines of great visual power:

He turned, and his great shadow on the wall  
Swayed like a tree. His eyes grew cold as lead.  
Then, in a rage of love and grief and pity,  
He made the pencilled map alive with war.

Most of the war poems dealing with superior army officers have tended to be satirical, condemning their stupidity, arrogance and callousness. Keyes's poem, on the other hand, is unique, because with his characteristic detachment he could see the Russian general as a tragic figure, who was faced with a tragic choice.

Keyes extended this concept to humanity in general, and believed that every man was faced with a tragic choice in life. He felt that literature was fundamentally concerned with tragedy, hence his own preoccupation with the theme of death. He made the following entry in his diary in March 1943:

How significant it is that Hood's ghost in *The Haunted House* is a daylight one! The Romantics raised a spectre they could not lay; it was, broadly speaking death as a part of life, conceived in terms of sensual imagery. To the Middle Ages and Elizabethans, death was merely the Leveller; to the C. 17, a metaphysical problem; to the C. 18, the end of life. The Romantics tried to think of it as a state of existence. By the 1840's, this had become an obsession, and had degenerated into curiosity.

By the C. 19, and up to our time, it has resulted in a clearly apparent *Death-Wish* as the only solution to the problem—since the

solution must come in sensual terms. It was left to Necrophilus Germany, to Rilke in fact, to provide the best solution short of actually dying. That's why there had to be a 'Poet of Death' in C. 20; and why Rilke is the most important European poet since Goethe and Wordsworth.<sup>20</sup>

Like Rilke, Keyes himself was a 'Poet of Death', and he believed that man carried death as a woman carried her child. We have already seen how Keyes had been concerned with pain, suffering and death. In some of the last poems that he wrote before he was killed, these themes acquire greater pointedness and authenticity.

'Four Postures of Death' comprises poems written separately, and they were not conceived as a sequence until later on. The last poem in the series, 'Death and the Plowman', is perhaps the most impressive. Here Keyes faces death in its nakedness, as it were, and its horror fascinates him instead of repelling him, because by now he has come to recognise death not only as an immediate but also as a necessary reality. In a letter to John Heath-Stubbs, he remarked:

But my most exciting single experience was Helpmann's *Hamlet* ballet, which I saw twice in the same week at Edinburgh. It is an extraordinarily sinister work, with a sadistic quality which makes it really painful to watch. I was able to accept the whole thing entirely without question. . . . Its total effect is one of great horror and pain—all the more so, because one can well imagine that the moment of death will take such a form.<sup>21</sup>

The 'moment of death' is foreseen in 'Death and the Plowman', and the vision is conveyed through dry, hard images which are more in the tradition of Webster and his contemporaries than in that of the Romantics. The Rider tells the Plowman not to ask for alms because he is going to 'the dry valley of bones' in his search for a drop of truth'. The Plowman wants to accompany the Rider, but the latter warns him of the perils of such a quest. But the Plowman insists hoping that he too might 'wither into the truth' (cf. Yeats's 'The Coming of Wisdom With Time'):

It's only the wind holds my poor bones together;  
So take me with you to that famous land.  
There I might wither, as I'm told some do,

Out of my rags and boast at last  
The integrated skeleton of truth.

So, both of them set out on their common search:

We're driving to the famous land some call  
Posterity, some famine, some the valley  
Of bones, valley of bones, valley of dry  
Bones where there is no heat nor hope nor dwelling:  
But cold security, the one and only  
Right of a workless man without a home.

Keyes was, in fact, nerving himself to face death. It may be recalled that he had once told Milein that he was ever ready to sacrifice his body, 'the body exists to be given, not to be owned. The gift is equally valid, whether to a gun or to a lover.' But at the same time he had expressed the fear that such a sacrifice 'might so easily mean submission and not what I intend—the conquest of the physical world by acceptance'. One obvious way of making the sacrifice meaningful was to see life, its pains and death, from the Christian angle. He does precisely that in the poem 'William Byrd'. The poet speaks through the mouth of the sixteenth-century English composer of Church music, and expresses a quiet but firm hope that after the sufferings of this world, salvation would await him:

Lord, I am no coward,  
But an old man remembering the candle-flames  
Reflected in the scroll-work, frozen trees  
Praying for Advent, the willow cut at Easter.  
The quires are dumb. My spirit sings in silence.  
You will appoint the day of my arising.

The gentle tone of these lines creates a sense of religious certainty, the light of 'the candlefl-ames' shines, even though 'the quires are dumb'. Keyes also went to the Arthurian legends in order to underline the theme of redemption through sacrifice and death. The symbolism of 'The Grail' was largely taken from Charles Williams's *Tahessin Through Logres*, in which Blanchefleur, the sister of Percival, died of giving blood to a sick girl. Keyes presents Blanchefleur as a symbol of love, which triumphed through sacrifice: 'She alone/Knew from her birth the mystic Avalon.'



But he did not find it easy to accept such assurances completely. He turned the other way round in 'The Expected Guest' in which he despairs of salvation, as it was symbolised in the Syrian Veronica's handkerchief that bore the imprint of Christ's features. The 'guest' in the poem is Christ, who is dead, and the living people are also dying:

We are dying to-night, you in the aged darkness  
And I in the white room my pride has rented,  
And either way, we have to die alone.

Similarly, in 'An Early Death', of the grief of the mother whose son has died in war is likened to that of Mary's over Christ's crucifixion. And in both the cases, the grief is bitter, and is unredeemed by any spiritual consolation for the mother. In fact, the confident hope which turned into bitter disappointment is conveyed very effectively through the central image of the tree:

But for the mother what can I find of comfort?  
She who wrought glory out of bone and planted  
The delicate tree of nerves whose foliage  
Responded freely to the loving wind?  
Her grief is walking through a harried country  
Whose trees, all fanged with savage thorns, are bearing  
Her boy's pale body worried on the thorns.

However, Keyes kept up his determination not to give in to despair. That is why a poem like 'Moonlight Night on the Port' is marked by passionate tones of both bitterness and defiance. The poem is about soldiers and sailors lost at sea. The sea is not a symbol in the poem, rather, along with night and the moon, it constitutes a sombre backdrop against which the dead men are seen. Keyes portrays them in the manner of Webster:

Some were unlucky. Blown a mile to shoreward  
Their crossed hands lie among the bitter marsh-grass.

Link arms and sing. The moon sails out  
Spreading distraction on the faces, drawing  
The useful hands to birdclaws. . . .

But here again, such a macabre scene does not drive the poet into uncontrolled hysteria. The unsentimental recognition of human reality enables him to salvage what can be recovered from such a situation. This resolution comes out in a compelling image like 'the tide's kiss on this dog-toothed shore':

bearing our weakness bravely  
Through all the frigid seasons, we have weighed  
The chances against us, and refuse no kisses—  
Even the tide's kiss on this dog-toothed shore.

This kind of fierce acceptance of necessity is most memorably expressed in Keyes's last poem, 'The Wilderness'. It is a poem of various literary influences, and the poet had originally dedicated it 'I. M. Geoffrey Chaucer, George Darley, T. S. Eliot, the other explorers'. The poem bears the obvious influence of Darley, from whose book *Nepenthe* Keyes got the idea of the Phoenix as a symbol of pride, which is the starting point of his own poem. He had praised the flat, direct style of Eliot's 'Little Gidding' which, along with 'The Waste Land', echoes throughout 'The Wilderness'. Despite these literary influences, 'The Wilderness' is a highly individual work; it is an example of Keyes's ability to assimilate external influences and to transmute them into a work that is uniquely his own. The poem is a unified whole in itself. It starts with the instinctive knowledge that the 'red rock wilderness/Shall be my dwelling place' and after extensive explorations, ends with a description of the very nature of it:

Flesh is fire, frost and fire:  
Flesh is fire in this wilderness of fire  
Which is our dwelling.

More importantly, the poem forms an integral part of Keyes's entire poetic output. In a prefatory note to *The Cruel Solstice* (1944), he had said that 'the poems have been arranged in a rough order of thought: and shall be read consecutively'. 'The Wilderness' is the last poem in this collection, and it marks the climax of his poetic development. It shows the rapt understanding aimed at all along in his poetry, a poetic vision which came out of a mature acceptance of life's realities. In other words, while reading the poem at the end of his *Collected Poems*, one has the feeling that all his poems were heading towards

this climax, though much in the earlier poems has been discarded in the process and many old ideas have taken a firmer shape. In an earlier poem, 'Time Will Not Grant', he had expressed his fear that things might change, rendering his life useless:

But I am frightened after every good day  
That all my life must change and fall away.

But in 'The Wilderness', change is seen as an inevitable, even a desirable, fact of life because man must carry his dreadful mission to its proper completion:

There is no parting  
From friends, but only from the ways of friendship;  
Nor from our lovers, though the forms of love  
Change often as the landscape of this journey  
To the dark valley where the gold bird burns.

The key image of the poem is, of course, the wilderness, which recurs throughout his poems, directly or indirectly, right from the time he wrote one of his first poems at Oxford. In that poem, 'Advice for a Journey', he made a plea to the men of his generation to view the future unclouded by sentimental hope:

So take no rations, remember not your homes  
Only the blind and stubborn hope to track  
This wilderness.

Similarly, in 'Death and the Plowman' ('Four Postures of Death') we found him marching to the 'valley of bones, valley of dry/Bones where there is no heat nor hope nor dwelling'. And in this last major poem, we see the poet come face to face with the pitiless desert:

The rock says 'Endure'.  
The wind says 'Pursue'.  
The sun says 'I will suck your bones  
And afterwards bury you'.

It is important that Keyes is no longer a spectator as he was in 'The Foreign Gate', but identifies himself with the protagonist in the

present poem. Perhaps that was why, while he used the second person plural in the first draft, he changed it to the first in the final version. Thus, 'The red rock wilderness/Shall be your dwelling place' became '...my dwelling place', 'Your bleeding feet' became 'my own bleeding feet', and so on. His only mission in this desert is to find 'the predatory Phoenix', the symbol of pride:

The home of the gold bird, the predatory Phoenix.  
O louder than the tongue of any river  
Call the red flames among the shapes of rock:  
And this is my calling ....

The notion that he must discover and destroy the Phoenix of pride before he can 'sing the song that rises from the fire' is a philosophical extension of his idea in 'The Foreign Gate' that the mere acceptance of pain and death constitutes glory:

The uniform of pain with pain put on is straiter  
Than any lover's garment; yet the death  
Of these is different, and their glory greater.  
(*'The Foreign Gate'*)

Now all the good and the evil of this world must be left behind, and nothing should matter except his 'calling':

No weather, even this cruel sun can change us;  
No dress, though you in shining satin walk  
Or you in velvet, while I run in tatters  
Against the fiery wind. There is no loss,  
Only the need to forget. This is my calling. ...

He is prepared to leave behind his beloved too. But she is not content to 'sit/Alone with her candle in a darkened room', and is determined to 'follow after you and stand beside you there'. So they join forces in the quest:

And we go forth, we go forth together  
With our lank shadows dogging us, scrambling  
Across the raw red stones.

Here again, we find a development in Keyes's views from the time when he wrote 'Remember Your Lovers', in which women stay back and grieve as their lovers go away to war. Now Keyes has acquired a deeper and more universal vision of the trial in which everyone has to participate:

All who would save their life must find the desert  
The lover, the poet, the girl who dreams of Christ,  
And the swift runner, crowned with another laurel:  
They all must face the sun, the red rock desert,  
And see the burning of the metal bird.  
Until you have crossed the desert and faced that fire  
Love is an evil, a shaking of the hand,  
A sick pain draining courage from the heart.

It was after he had made this grim but determined realisation that Keyes sailed for North Africa where he died soon afterwards. As noted earlier, he believed with Rilke that man carried death as a woman carries her child. When that moment of birth came to him, he was prepared to accept it with courage. His intellectual progression towards death culminated in 'The Wilderness', and knowing that he grew up, and died, during the war years, we can see how his external experiences matched his deepest thoughts. That was why he was able to absorb war as part of total human experience. This is an astonishing achievement for a young man who had not yet reached his twenty-first birthday when he died. If his technique is not exciting and startlingly new, it is certainly adequate. Many of his poems do suffer from verbal excesses and uncontrolled imagery. It is also true that he tends to give the impression, in the words of Robert Graves, of 'being syncretist of group styles rather than a poet in his own right'.<sup>22</sup> But a careful and comprehensive reading of his poems as a whole soon dispels that impression. One realises that Keyes was searching for his own vision and his own style, and that in some of his last poems he succeeded to a great extent in achieving both. 'The Wilderness', for example, not only projects his own vision but also shows the style of the poet who had learnt to give his lines the austerity that turned his lyricism into impressive solemnity.

Keyes had said: 'The artist is a man who has visions and is able to communicate them, in a necessarily imperfect form, to a wide audience.... He will have succeeded, as far as possible, if he can give his

audience some inkling of the continual fusion of finite and infinite, spiritual and physical, which is our world.<sup>23</sup> Having been called upon to bring about such a fusion in times of war's atrocities and brutalities, Keyes himself vindicated his concept of the role of an artist. And what he said about the permanence and universality of artistic achievement holds true of his own work too:

As long as he (the artist) continues to believe in the importance of his art. . . there is no danger that the artist will be swamped by the war, or find himself impotent when peace comes at last.<sup>24</sup>

## SEVEN

### *Epilogue*

HORACE, IT IS SAID, fled from the battlefield of Philippi, throwing away his shield, and war never meaningfully entered his life or poetry. But the English poets who grew to manhood during either of the two World Wars not only fought but also wrote their best poetry in war's dark shadow. Wars in the twentieth century have been fundamentally different from those in the past in the sense that while warfare was traditionally the affair of warrior classes, in our times it has permeated the lives of whole nations. It is basically this change that has necessitated a readjustment in the relationship between the Muse and Mars.

The fact of collective participation, as well as responsibility, brought before the common man the 'reality' of war, its horror, suffering and brutality. The major poets of the First War devoted themselves to the exposure of such 'truths' of war, and succeeded in creating stirring poetry. But the obvious shortcomings of their poetry were that it tended to be propagandistic, and confined to a few themes and specific events of the time. Art is more than a mere representation of life. Also, it is more than a mere reflection of only topical realities. So that, if modern war poetry was to have the universal validity of all good poetry, the poets concerned had to have the ability not only to concentrate on the feelings of exhilaration, fear, horror, agony and pity aroused by war, but also to discover in them resemblances to man's deepest human experiences.

This was the direction in which the best poets of the Second World War moved. Condemnation of war and its atrocities was only a starting point for them, and they went on to relate their experiences to the larger context of human life as a whole. The realisation on their part that the 'warnings' of their predecessors to the greedy and unscrupulous politicians were of no avail, and that the war had inevitably come, did not throw these poets into an apathy of 'spiritless resignation', just as the greatest poets have not given up the deter-

mination to live meaningfully in spite of their consciousness of the perpetual presence of death. In fact, war experiences sharpened their responses to life. That is why life, love and death, which have been the central themes of modern English war poetry, have been the subject of searching analysis and exploration against the fierce backdrop of war. Hence, this poetry is as significant and relevant at all times—war or peace—as any that concerns itself with the permanent human condition.

As we have seen, the development of war poetry in our times ran parallel to the changes that came about in contemporary poetry in general, thus making it a typical product of modern sensibility. Most of the poets—especially those of the Second World War—were men of solid literary background, and they were not only influenced by the prevailing literary climate but they also, in at least a few cases, helped to shape it to a certain extent. The poetry of the First World War brought about the final break with 'traditional' English poetry and paved the way for modern English poetry which, while it denounced the proclaimed ideals of the age, concerned itself with the devitalised and brutal life of man in the twentieth century industrial world. It was this poetry that also inspired the 'social' poetry of the thirties. Ironically, at the time of the Second World War, the English poetic scene was marked by a 'romantic' reaction against 'social' poetry. The poets of this war avoided the irrationalism and excesses of the contemporary 'neo-romantic' poets but adopted the basic 'romantic' tendency to deal with the permanent human, as opposed to social, realities. Thus they were able to see war as part of modern poetic experience. And they brought it about that, during times of war, the English Muse refused to pay special homage to Mars, or indeed to depend on his bounty, and inspired poets to write about more fundamental themes. Perhaps it would be more precise to say that the modern English war poet's confrontation with death led him to a greater awareness of life. If, as M. L. Rosenthal points out, 'in modern poetry there is death on every page, though often it is death (and rebirth) of our civilization that is the real obsession' (*The Modern Poets*, p. 9), then war poetry constitutes an integral, and important, chapter in the history of that poetry.



# Notes

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